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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE POETRY OF W. S. MERWIN: A STUDY OF THEME AND STYLE

by

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KEITH SWIFT

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Poetry of W. S. Merwin: A Study of Theme and Style submitted by Keith Swift in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date September 25, 1980

PROMETHEUS BOUND

in dedication

Chained like a dog
between both worlds
he must have felt
the need to explain
as though for the first time
the twirling stick
or the quick flame leaping
from the blue white underbelly of ash
or before the first beak
exploded in his breast
he must have remembered
as though for the first time
her harvest
summer in the eye of the sun
the seed a festival of return
and virgins dancing
to the clack of bones
or grain fields in moonlight
waiting
as though for the first time
like the sea itself
about to break
or the sacred places
hung with pomegranate peach and plum
hazelnut and braided honeybread
as though for the first time
he must have known
the way it would always be
chained like a dog and
traced with a wand
like water to the witching tree

ABSTRACT

The first chapter of this study introduces the nine volumes of W. S. Merwin's poetry that he has written to date. The critical response to these volumes is then summarized and immediately followed by a summary of my own critical opinion which shows how my view differs from the general view of Merwin's critics. Significant changes in the style of Merwin's collections are also discussed both in conjunction with the critical articles about his poetry, and in the light of what he has said in various essays and interviews.

Chapter Two examines in more detail Merwin's first four books, A Mask for Janus (1952), The Dancing Bears (1954), Green With Beasts (1956), and The Drunk in the Furnace (1960), which are generally referred to as his early works, and shows how these books delineate a figurative odyssey that parallels Merwin's own travels throughout Europe. These four books trace a circumambient and atemporal journey during which Merwin pays homage to representative literary figures, such as St.-John Perse, unnamed poets of the Provençal, and T. S. Eliot, whom Merwin figuratively acknowledges as his father. Together, the four books enable one to ground Merwin's poetry within a literary tradition from which in his fifth book, The Moving Target (1963), he departs. In this chapter, I also show that although there is a marked change in the style of the poems in The Moving Target from that of his previous work, the change is predicated by significant, though not as obvious, changes

in the style of his preceding books.

Chapter Three deals exclusively with The Moving Target, and shows through an examination of its poems, particularly two of its major poems, "Home for Thanksgiving," and "Lemuel's Blessing," that this book contains not only Merwin's literary manifesto, but also a testament of his commitment as an artist to the common man. This commitment is expressed as much in the spoken, as opposed to the written, quality of the poems as it is in their progressive simplicity and the topical relevancy of his themes.

The fourth chapter of this study discusses the poetry in The Lice (1967), the title and poems of which indicate that Merwin is beginning to explore preliterate modes of consciousness, such as that of the Fragments of Heraclitus from which the title of Merwin's volume is derived. The general perspective of a preliterate mode of awareness, which is also referred to as mythopoeic or prelogical, affords a counter to what Merwin sees as the limitation of essentially logical modes of consciousness.

Similarly, Chapter Five discusses the poems in The Carrier of Ladders, which are also informed by preliterate modes of awareness. Particular emphasis is given to the general theme of modern man's divisiveness, and to the relevancy of a nucleus of poems that trace Merwin's descent into American history.

The sixth and concluding chapter of this study discusses Merwin's two most recent books, Writings to an Unfinished

Accompaniment (1973) and The Compass Flower (1977). Both of these books trace the continuation of Merwin's poetic odyssey, although the mandala-like image of the compass flower suggests, what the poems confirm, that Merwin has resolved conflicts that are apparent in his previous collections, and which perhaps spurred him on his odyssey.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

W[illiam] S[tanley] Merwin is an American poet who has received most of the major literary awards that can be conferred upon an artist. Over a period of thirty years, he has written more than nine volumes of poetry, two volumes of prose, three original plays, several adaptations, and, in addition to numerous essays and articles, fourteen volumes of translations. Yet there is a sparsity of critical opinion regarding his work--fewer than forty articles, most of which do not exceed ten pages-- which suggests that he is not as well known, nor as widely read, as one might expect him to be. He seems to retain, in fact, the relative anonymity of the initials by which he is generally known.

There must be many explanations for this. For instance, instead of remaining in the United States, or even in one particular place, where he might have more easily established his reputation, Merwin has moved, more or less continually, from country to country and from place to place. Another explanation, perhaps, is that he is not only a prolific poet but a difficult one, in that his poetry is itself characterized by continual stylistic changes which have earned him the suitable epithet of the "protean" Merwin. Added to this is the fact that he seems to be as reluctant to talk about his poetry as he is to publicize it, reiterating only that the voice of the poet is a "gift," and "necessarily one of the genuinely private and integral things he lives for."[1]

Apart from the portrait of him that one finds in his poetry, Merwin has done little to make himself familiar. He gives infrequent readings of his poetry, rarely embellishes upon it, and, in three that I have heard, includes translations of other poets. Details of his biography are few and scattered. Collected, they amount to little more than that which appears on the flyleaves of his books.[2]

He was born, the son of a Presbyterian minister, on September 30, 1927, in New York City. His family moved from there to Union City, New Jersey, and then to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where he spent the remainder of his childhood. He attended Princeton on a scholarship, where, under the guidance of R. P. Blackmur, Herman Broch, and John Berryman, poetry became his vocation.

Before Merwin graduated from Princeton in 1947, and determined to become a poet, he made "the pilgrimage to St. Elizabeth's to see Pound." Pound impressed upon him the "value of translation as a means of continually sharpening a writer's awareness of the possibilities of his own language," and particularly the sounds of that language.[3] When Merwin graduated, he decided to remain at Princeton in order to further his studies in Romance Languages, but after a year of graduate school he left.

In 1949, as Pound and Eliot had done, Merwin decided to move to Europe. For two years, he worked as "the tutor to the children of the Princess de Braganza in Portugal and to the household of Robert Graves in Majorca."[4] Then, in 1952, he moved to London where he supported himself by translating French and Spanish classics that were commissioned by the Third Programme of the British Broadcasting Corporation. His knowledge of Romance languages began to provide him with a livelihood on which he still depends, and with the freedom to pursue his vocation as a poet. But he first began translating, he says, "with the idea that it could teach me something about writing poetry." And, at that time, he adds, "the neo-Flaubertian image of poetry as 'craft' was in all the ikons that I could see."[5]

How thoroughly Merwin had already trained himself in the "craft" of poetry was shown in his first collection of poems, A Mask for Janus (1952), which was selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. In his Preface to this collection, Auden praises Merwin's erudition and, also, his keen sense of the Western literary heritage, which is evident in the variety of lyrical forms that Merwin employs in A Mask for Janus. These forms range from familiar ones of the Provençal, such as the sestina, to more obscure ones, such as the "cynghanedd" of medieval Welsh poetry.

After reading Auden's Preface to A Mask for Janus, Richard Wilbur was "prepared to doubt the poems in advance," suspecting that they might be too traditional in the sense of being unoriginal. And, in his review of the book, he implies that a few of the poems come close to being too traditional, and that they could be regarded as "merely exercises." But, Wilbur was impressed by Merwin's "eloquence. . . and his considerable technical abilities."[6] Such praise, in varying degrees, is characteristic of the critical response to Merwin's first book.

Two years after the publication of A Mask for Janus, Merwin's second book, The Dancing Bears (1954), was published. This book, like Merwin's first, was similarly honored by the award of a Kenyon Review Fellowship. But the critical response to it was even more enthusiastic than that to his first collection. Several critics noted with favor that its poems were less formal, less traditional. For one or two critics, W. D. Snodgrass for instance, the poems were still too formal and lacked an essential "human" quality. But Snodgrass allows that "there can be no question of Merwin's talent," and he concludes his review of the book by acknowledging that part of his own "dissatisfaction must come from envy, honorable or not."[7]

In 1956, Merwin's third volume, Green With Beasts, was published. It was selected by the British Poetry Book Society. But, curiously, of all of Merwin's books, this one has received the least critical attention. It was given flattering reviews, such as that by Joseph Warren Beach, who finds in it further evidence of a steady development in Merwin's collections from what he claims is more or less traditional verse to modern poetry. Green With Beasts, he says, "shows an extraordinary advance in maturity and power over his earliest volumes."[8] It is difficult to account for the book's lack of critical attention. When it is mentioned in articles, it is done so, almost exclusively, in the context of praise, in which Merwin's name is frequently linked with those of major American poets. However, this is also true of the reviews of The Dancing Bears.

In the same year that Green With Beasts was published, Merwin received grants for playwriting from both the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Rockefeller Foundation. Later, also in 1956, he returned to the United States to accept the position of Playwright-in-residence at the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His first play, "Darkling Child" (written in collaboration with Dido Milroy), was produced at the London Arts Theatre before he left England. And, both of Merwin's other plays "Favor Island" and "The Gilded West," and, also, his five adaptations, have been either published or produced. But his interest in drama, which grew, he says, "from a fascination with the theatre. . . and a fascination with simply writing drama," ended with him feeling dissatisfied. And, after completing a fourth play, Merwin found himself "without any great desire to write any more."[9]

A Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in 1957, gave Merwin further opportunity to continue translating and, also, to continue writing his own poetry. In 1959, his first major translation, Poem of the Cid, was published. This was followed, in 1960, by his fourth collection of poems, The Drunk in the Furnace.

The personal and prosaic intimacy of this collection, which generally contrasts with the more impersonal austerity of his earlier work, was noted by several critics. James Dickey's observation is generally representative of the critical response to this volume. "I think a new strange kind of simplicity is now becoming available to Merwin," he says, "and the fact that it is slowly emerging from the techniques of one of the master prosodists of our time makes its advent doubly worth watching."[10] Similarly, X. J. Kennedy welcomes what he calls Merwin's new "gutsier" voice in The Drunk in the Furnace, and ends his review of the book by stating: "If Pound is right that six decent lines make a man immortal, then Merwin, as not many his age have done, already may have saved himself a few times over."[11]

The Drunk in the Furnace is the final book of what is generally referred to as Merwin's early work. When he completed this book, Merwin was not sure that he would continue to write poetry; but he knew, if he did, that it would be different from anything that he had written before. He remained in the United States for several years and, assisted by grants, continued to translate the work of other poets. His Spanish Ballads was published in 1960, followed by The Satires of Persius in 1961, Lazarillo de Tormes in 1962, and The Song of Roland in 1963. For a period of one year, between 1962-63, Merwin was the poetry editor of The Nation, to which he contributed several essays that show his commitment to pacifism and his sympathy with anti-war and anti-nuclear groups.

These essays, and Merwin's satire "A New Right Arm" (1963), which advocates the nurturing and deployment of radioactively induced mutants to satisfy the military's demand for personnel, complement the protest poems in Merwin's next collection, The Moving Target. This volume won the National Book Award and, more than any other of his collections, it shows the most radical change in his style--a change that is solely responsible for the distinction which is made between his early and his recent work.

The poems in The Moving Target are certainly different from those which preceded. Stephen Stepanchev, echoing an earlier statement by Thomas P. Roche, asserts that "the style of The Moving Target could not have been predicted on the basis of the four earlier books,"[12] but this is an overstatement. However, the poetry is sufficiently different for it to have received generally guarded reviews.

Joseph Bennett says of it: "One cannot find five ordinary lines without coming on something extraordinary and good; but it is all dispersed, nothing connects; all the good stuff is scattered there impartially, inexplicably."[13] Another reviewer, Edward Dorn, looked for a clarity that he had found in Merwin's satirical essay "A New Right Arm," and not finding it he protested: "Why does the verse need to be so metaphorical? For all the use of the concrete, to my eye what remains is suggestion, in context surprisingly abstract."[14] Similarly, David Galler complained: "These are not poems that progress with an end-in-view . . . . A little more control over language and more care as to choice of subject, and Merwin would probably write much as he did six years ago. Which is to say, the target would stop moving."[15]

These three reviews, all remarkably similar, afford a startling contrast to those of Merwin's earlier books. In retrospect, they may appear to be irrelevant to Merwin criticism. At least, this is how Keith Gunderson regards one of the reviews. In an article that deals exclusively with The Moving Target, he cites Dorn's review as an example of a type of criticism that is incapable of evaluating poetry that is new or experimental because it remains, he says, "shackled to what is no longer new or experimental." And it creates, he adds, the very problems ("alleged obscurity, evasiveness, abstraction, and the lack of precision") that it purports to have found.

Gunderson thinks that The Moving Target "contains Merwin's most accomplished work to-date" (1965), but he does not consider its poems to be "fantastically new." "Surrealism," he reasons, "occurred some time ago, although," he adds, "Merwin's work is a far cry from automatic writing." Gunderson concludes that "a number of Merwin's own writings, such as some of his translations from Lorca, show that The Moving Target has developed out of long-standing interests and practices, and did not simply drop from the blue." But, other than citing Merwin's translation of a poem by Lorca, which he compares to a poem from The Moving Target, he does not support his conclusions.[16]

Gunderson is among other critics who have thought that the style of The Moving Target shows the influence of poets whom Merwin has translated. Merwin, however, professes to having kept his translations and his own poetry "sharply separate." I recognize that the one activity could influence the other, but I am inclined to believe Merwin, not because of my limited knowledge of languages, which would prevent me from making a responsible assessment of any such influence, but for reasons that will be obvious later. It is very likely, however, that Merwin's profession as a translator has sharpened his awareness of words beyond that which must be expected of any poet, and particularly his awareness of the etymology of words, which is repeatedly germane to his poetry.

Following the publication of The Moving Target in 1963, Merwin probably returned to live in France. Available details of his recent biography suggest only that, although he has returned to North America occasionally, he has been living in France, Mexico, and Hawaii. But, for a period of ten months, during 1964-65, he was associated with Roger Planchon's Theatre de la Cité in Lyon, France. In France, and probably on a farm in the secluded countryside of Lot, Merwin continued to translate and, also, to write his own poetry. He was assisted by a Ford Foundation grant (1964-65), and a fellowship from the Chapelbrook Foundation (1966).

In 1967, Merwin's sixth collection of poems, The Lice, was published. Characteristically, this collection shows yet another change in Merwin's style. Its poems are thematically similar to those in The Moving Target. But they are noticeably shorter: some are only one or two lines in length. The brevity of these poems and, in general, the absence of punctuation and connectives, together with sudden and seemingly random shifts within individual poems, evoked immediate and often disparate responses. William Dickey, for reasons that he does not substantiate, is openly antagonistic in his review of The Lice. He says: "The relation of poetic language to poetic substance is of dismaying interest in W. S. Merwin's new book. I began reading it with the antagonism I have generally felt for Merwin--a facile poet so persuaded of the virtue of his personality that he has often been willing to let a poem go by half-defined. My first experience of the book reinforced that opinion: If accident is fashionable, I should expect to find Merwin embracing accident, and I did."[17]

By contrast, Harvey Gross hails The Lice as Merwin's most important work," and as "an astonishing achievement already widely imitated." He cites Eliot's claim that "there are three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets, . . . 'abundance, variety, and complete competence,'" and then gives evidence of these qualities in Merwin's poetry. Gross does acknowledge that in The Lice it is difficult to separate "Merwin's 'method' from his subject." The lines, he says, "move to no metric we can count and parse." But, he points out, "a poet's rhythm articulates his ways of feeling; his metaphor projects his 'Weltanschauung.' His voice, his rhythm, his vision: particular ways of relating the disparate parts of existence, are also his meaning."[18]

Other critics are equally receptive to the uniqueness of the style in The Lice. Jarold Ramsey says of its poems: "More than any other American poetry, in their forms, they seem really to follow the mind's first unpurposive gathering of images and words before it is forced to move towards concepts, conclusions, public utterance." Such forms, anticipated by Eliot's "Prufrock," he reasons, might be labeled "neuropoetics," or "a poetic style which, in Roethke's formula, is able to 'catch the very movement of the mind itself.'"[19] Similarly, Stanley Cooperman acknowledges a "surrealistic" quality in the poems, which convey, he says, "the substance of the lyric mind in action."[20]

The consensus of these views, that the style of The Lice is of a personal and idiosyncratic mode, is obliquely substantiated in a long philosophical essay by Jan B. Gordon. Gordon examines some of the poems in The Lice and, also, some of the prose parables in Merwin's The Miner's Pale Children (1970), which he views as commentary on the nature of perception. But, unlike the other critics, he harbors the "lurking suspicion" that perhaps Merwin "is an engineer of words, a bricoleur, rather than an innovator."[21]

Many of the articles on The Lice are contradictory, and may persuade readers that Merwin's poetry was becoming more difficult to understand. Ironically, Merwin was attempting to make his poetry more simple, more direct. "As for the result," Merwin said, "some people thought the poems were clear, but other people thought they were absolutely incomprehensible!"[22] For one critic, Lisel Mueller, his attempt was largely successful. She remembers the "extraordinary purity of diction and imagery" in The Moving Target, but she also remembers being "frustrated by its obscureness." But, in The Lice, she says, "the language is still stunningly pure, . . . and Mr. Merwin has, for the most part, removed the obstacles to understanding."[23]

After the publication of The Lice, in 1967, Merwin published a volume of his Selected Translations 1948-1968, Transparence of the World (poems by Jean Follain), Voices (poems by Antonio Porchia), Products of the Perfected Civilization (selected writings of Chamfort), and Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair (poems by Pablo Neruda), all in 1969.

Merwin's seventh collection of poems, The Carrier of Ladders, was written in France and published in 1970. It won the Pulitzer Prize. The poems in The Carrier of Ladders are not radically different from those in The Lice. John Vernon suggests in a review that Merwin seems "to be imitating himself,"[24] but Richard Howard does not think so. The poems in The Carrier of Ladders, he says, "are the progress report and the prognosis of a development which has been under way, in terms of prosody, in Merwin's last two books of verse; in terms of imagery, in the last four."[25] Jarold Ramsey, in a Postscript to his article on The Lice, says: "In this essay conceived and largely completed before Merwin's seventh collection, The Carrier of Ladders, appeared in late 1970, I have felt I could best say what I most wanted to say about Merwin's poetry by focusing on a book as absolute, as pure and formally achieved as The Lice. Here, I happily change ground and declare that The Carrier of Ladders is unquestionably Merwin's greatest book. . . . "[26] But an otherwise sparsity of critical opinion in the reception of The Carrier of Ladders suggests, perhaps, that there is a growing familiarity with Merwin's general style that has ended the controversy that the style of The Moving Target began.

In the last decade, Merwin has published five separate translations: Asian Figures, in 1973; Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam (with Clarence Brown), in 1974; Vertical Poetry (poems by Roberto Juarroz), in 1977; Classical Sanskrit Love Poetry (with J. Moussaieff Masson), in 1977; Iphigeneia at Aulis, by Euripides (with George E. Dimock, Jr.), in 1977; and, also, a second volume of Selected Translation 1968-1978; and a volume of prose, Houses and Travelers, in 1977. His two most recent collections of poetry, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment (1973) and The Compass Flower (1977), both of which partly earned him the Fellowship of the American Academy of Poets, in 1974, and the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, in 1979, were extremely well received by the reviewers, although there is still a sparsity of substantive criticism on these works.

Both books show Merwin to be still developing and extending the forms of American poetry. And both collections show no radical change in his style. But neither do they show a similarity that might tie him to a specific school of poets or poetry. As Stanley Cooperman, among other critics, noted in 1968, Merwin has resisted any attempt to have his poetry classified. He has "enlisted nowhere," and has refused to "declare himself." And so he remains, as his poetry attests, the "protean" Merwin.[27]

The succession of Merwin's nine volumes of poetry, together with the distinction that has been made between his early and recent work, provides convenient reference points in a large body of poetry. But, however convenient such divisions may appear, they tend to encourage a partial criticism of his poetry that often fragments and obscures his achievement. Many articles on Merwin's individual books, or on groups of his poems, which are otherwise illuminating in their details, are frequently marred by misinterpretations, or by undue criticism, which stem from a failure to recognize what Merwin is doing in the light of what he has done.

Virtually every one of Merwin's critics has recognized that his poetry is characterized by change. Yet very few critics have realized that change itself, metamorphosis, is not only the subject of many poems but, also, a major theme and a unifying principle throughout his poetry. A study that takes a generally eclectic approach, using the concept of metamorphosis as a touchstone, and begins with the premise that Merwin's poetry is a unified whole, will show that one of the major concerns of his poetry is poetry itself, and that all of his work represents the spiritual autobiography of an American poet in search of an ideal, the absolute poem.

In this study, I will attempt to trace the evolution of Merwin's poetry, which extends over a period of thirty years, and to show its essential unity by following the continuous thread of a quest myth, or the evidence of an odyssey. Throughout this odyssey, the figure of the poet remains ahead, always somewhat distant and indistinct. Sometimes he appears to assume other forms, such as that of a modern Odysseus, a Janus, an Orpheus, or, the exemplar of changing shapes, Proteus himself.

It is not always easy to distinguish the figure from the ground: "I will myself become a Hades into which I can descend,"[28] the poet declares at one point. And, at other times, he appears to assume the form of a totem animal whose way is difficult to follow, "like tracks made in a wet season, at the end of which," he says, "I have vanished, so that those who track me for their own twisted ends may be rewarded only with ignorance and failings."[29] At other points along the way, only the echo of a literary convention remains to indicate a direction, such as that in "Envoy from D'Aubigné." And even this shows that the poet has not been tamed, and that, as well as being difficult, it could be critical folly to attempt to track him. "Go without ornament/ without showy garment," he bids his book, "if there is in you any/ joy/ may the good find it/ for the others be/ a glass broken in their mouths."[30]

Merwin's odyssey begins with his first collection of poems and extends throughout his poetry. In his early work, one cycle of this odyssey involves an exploration of traditional forms and meters, and a figurative dialogue with poets of the Western heritage. This cycle of his odyssey closely parallels his travels throughout Europe and, analogically, the past. It culminates with his return to America and, again, analogically, to the present. This point is coexistent with the completion of The Drunk in the Furnace, and prior to the publication of The Moving Target in which the most celebrated change in Merwin's style occurs. This change is considered by some critics to be completely unpredictable, but it is in fact quite predictable, especially when it is viewed as a natural development of the formal experimentation in his early work.

Merwin's early poetry tends to be neglected, and considered to be quite separate from his recent poetry. Yet it is integral to it and has contributed to its development. The title of Merwin's first book, A Mask for Janus, points to this conclusion. Janus is an ancient double-headed god of all beginnings to whom, with his first book, Merwin naturally pays homage. But, more significantly, Janus' unique perspective, which allows him to see behind as well as in front of himself, or, analogically, the past as well as the future, is a perspective that governs the poetry in this volume. Through the medium of many traditional forms that Merwin employs in A Mask for Janus, he is not simply demonstrating that he is an accomplished craftsman, as the majority of critics conclude, but attempting to re-experience poetic history, and to determine for himself viable means of poetic expression.

Viewed another way, Janus' double-headed mask fascilitates a more or less continual dialogue on the subject of poetry between Merwin and his Muse, and between himself and the immortal poets of the Western heritage. Merwin figuratively acknowledges the beauty and the comfort of many traditional forms, which he views in one instance as "red coal come/ out of the warm,/ dry honeycomb,"[31] but he rejects others that have lost their virtue. For example, the medieval Welsh "cynghanedd," a scheme of sound correspondences, which greatly influenced Gerard Manley Hopkins in his own formal experimentation, is used by Merwin in "For a Dissolving Music" as an example of a form that is "tame," or domesticated: "What shall be heard?/ A hollow rhyme:/ the heart gone tame/ knocking afraid."[32] The complete poem is a comment on its form, a form that was actually codified by bardic law in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Further evidence of the continuation of Merwin's odyssey, and of his figurative dialogue with immortal poets, is to be found in his second book, The Dancing Bears. The merits of this volume are sufficient for Kenneth Anderson to equate Merwin, who was not quite twenty-seven when the volume was published, with two of the major poets of the twentieth century, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot.[33] In other discussions of The Dancing Bears, and of Merwin's subsequent poetry, Eliot's name is quite frequently mentioned, usually by way of a comparison. It is almost as though the critics sense affinities between Eliot and Merwin's poetry without actually identifying any as such. But, as I will show later, the title of The Dancing Bears is itself drawn from a famous poem of Eliot's involving the subject of poetic expression.

Green With Beasts also confirms the continuation of Merwin's odyssey. In many respects, but particularly in its diction and syntax, it is a more modern and a less traditional book than The Dancing Bears. However, it still shows kinships with traditional verse. For instance, the book is divided into three sections, the first of which is sub-titled "Physiologus: Chapters for a Bestiary." A "bestiary" is a medieval, didactic genre, both in prose and in poetry, in which a moral or religious significance is attached to the characteristics of animals. This genre can be traced to a lost Greek work that was called "Physiologus," or "The Naturalist." But there are many extant works, the fabulous, symbolic, and allegorical material of which is known to have been utilized by such famous poets and writers as John Lyly, Milton, and Dryden. Even as recently as 1919, this genre was revived by Guillaume Apollinaire's Bestiaire. Merwin's

"Bestiary" echoes facets of this tradition, not only in its choice of subject matter but in its Anglo-Saxon diction and syntax, and in its alliterative meter.

The second section of Green With Beasts, which is untitled, shows greater affinities with the much more recent Symbolist and post-Symbolist tradition. Its poems, some of which will be examined later, are generally concerned with the theme of poetic articulation, and with the influence of the European tradition. This theme is given symbolic expression, for instance, in "A Sparrow Sheltering Under a Column of the British Museum." In the poem, the poet is equated with a bird that is becoming somewhat domesticated in the shelter of the European heritage. He realizes that this heritage was "almost from the first more massive than our uses," but that the attachment is strong: "And that, though perhaps cold, he is at home there."[34] Other poems in this section, such as "Burning the Cat," show how difficult it is to dispose of anything which, even though dead, one has grown attached to.

In the same year that Green With Beasts was published, Merwin left England to return to America. His journey from the old world to the new is documented in a series of sea poems that comprise the final section of the book. Even Merwin's fear of this journey, that will take him across an archetypal sea and to a point at which he will have to face the future as a modern poet alone, is given symbolic expression.

It is difficult to explain why Green With Beasts has not received more critical attention. Although it has many elements of traditional verse, which link it with Merwin's previous work and with the European tradition, it is a modern work, and particularly in the canon of Merwin's poetry. It is a personal work in which, for the first time, Merwin uses the first person pronoun, and gives the reader a glimpse of the poet. Yet, curiously, it has been virtually ignored. Without it, Merwin's transition from a more or less traditional poet to a modern one is obscured. Which is not to say that Green With Beasts is a particularly modern work. Its tone, for instance, does not begin to approximate the informal and personal one which is characteristic of modern verse and of the majority of poems in Merwin's next collection, The Drunk in the Furnace.

The Drunk in the Furnace begins with a series of sea poems that links it with Green With Beasts, and which denies the separateness of Merwin's consecutive books. The style of this collection, as one would expect, is quite modern, and conspicuously American. Its poems, many of which have topical settings, are composed in the vernacular, and are replete with contemporary idioms. Without assessing the relevance of his observation, John Napier says in his review of the book: "The Drunk in the Furnace is a book of expertly written poems, composed as if the poet felt at home with his idiom, the American language."[35]

In this volume, Merwin remains preoccupied with the theme of poetic articulation. But, instead of continuing to explore his literary heritage, he now explores that of his cultural and familial one in a variety of poems that comprise most of the book. Also, he begins to explore topical, and more socially relevant, themes which, he feels, are also dictated by his vocation.

The first poem in The Drunk in the Furnace, "Odysseus," confirms the continuation of Merwin's odyssey. But, as I will show later, it is the poems that follow it which document his journey. They are intimate poems, quite unlike anything that Merwin has written before, which become progressively more personal in their details. Family members are introduced, their religious faith is reconsidered, and their secrets are divulged. All of them are treated with equal respect, but clearly it is the wayward ones who elicit Merwin's sympathy and his interest: the drunken grandfather, who followed the river "finding directions for boats"; and "Uncle Hess," the "wriest of uncles," who, a mystery himself, believed that "the mad world must be kept mystified or it would bite."[36]

The last character in this collection, and one who provides the book with its title, also has Merwin's sympathy. In fact, I am inclined to believe that this dionysian figure represents another metamorphosis of the poet. The dionysian rites, in celebration of the vine, hold forth the promise of a resurrection and a new life. Considering that this is the final poem in Merwin's early work, and coming as it does at this point in his odyssey, I believe that it announces a new beginning and admits a nonrational element into his poetry which is characteristic of his subsequent work.

Only one other critic has expressed a similar opinion. Robert Hass, in a review of The Lice, says of the poem: "In a comic way it announced the existence of the unconscious life, but it seems to me now to be a suburban genre poem of the fifties which comes out on the side of nonrational life without telling us anything about it. The point of view of the poem is that of an observer and its manner is descriptive." Hass goes on to say that "the impressive thing about The Lice is that it tries to take us inside the drunk inside the furnace and to tell us how things feel from there."[37] "The Drunk in the Furnace," as will be evident later, is not a comic poem. But what Hass implies about the point of view of the poems in The Lice is true, except that it should not be used as a standard to judge a poem in a book that was written almost a decade earlier. If Hass had been aware of the continuity of Merwin's poetry, he would probably not have made such a judgment.

The style of Merwin's next volume of poems, The Moving Target, has elicited many comments, and many critical explanations. One critic, Thomas P. Roche, has argued that the "new style" is directly related to thematic changes that are also apparent in Merwin's poetry. The themes of several essays, he reasons, that were written around the time of the publication of The Moving Target, themes involving ecological destruction, nuclear testing, and other controversial subjects, are also prevalent in The Moving Target and account for the satiric tone of many of its poems.[38]

Other critics, such as Carol Kyle, Anthony Libby, A. Poulin, Jr., Stanley Cooperman, Keith Gunderson and, particularly, Alan Williamson, have suggested that Merwin's style is that of a surrealist, or that he has been greatly influenced by surrealist poets whom he has translated. But their arguments are generally insubstantial, and in some cases they are simply assertions.

Merwin's style in The Moving Target is an extremely personal one. It has no obvious literary antecedents, and very few allusions and topical references in which to ground the poetry. The outlines of Merwin's odyssey suggest that, having explored his literary heritage, and reassessed his familial and cultural one, he would develop a style that would be uniquely his own. One of the clues to Merwin's new style in The Moving Target is often alluded to, at least in part, but it is rarely assessed. And that is the relative absence of the conventions of a written style, such as punctuation marks, connectives, and other sequential markers. Among other things, it is the absence of these elements, together with the increased use of common speech idioms and clichés, which show Merwin's poetry to be steadily moving away from a linear, literary style and toward that of an oral poetry. The evidence of this is to be found not just in The Moving Target but even throughout Merwin's earlier work.

For instance, in a long "Canso" from The Dancing Bears, that echoes the love themes of the troubadours, and one in which Merwin uses several mythic allegories of metamorphosis, he equates the poet with the minstrel Orpheus, and the word, or the song, with Orpheus' young bride Euridice. In spring and summer, Euridice is alive in this world, where she is equated by Merwin with the spoken word and the living breath. But in autumn and winter, she must remain in the underworld, where she is then equated by Merwin with the written word--a word that is figuratively dead, though not entirely lost to the living.

In this same "Canso," in a figurative dialogue with his Muse in which he laments the loss of the spoken word, Merwin asks, rhetorically: "What are the patterned/ Potsherds to him who knows what wine there was?"[39] This may allude to an undocumented claim by Robert Graves, in The White Goddess, that among the earlier forms of writing is that of a "Phoenician inscription . . . on a potsherd found at Bethshemeth in Palestine dating from the sixteenth century B.C."[40] But the identification of the allusion, if that is what it is, is not essential to an understanding that the complete "Canso" is a parable on the exigencies of poetic form. In the example from the poem, the adjective "patterned" (ME. patron, fr. OF. patron, "anything proposed for immitation; an archetype") contributes to this conclusion.

The successive changes in Merwin's style, that have been alluded to earlier, all lead to what I have characterized as oral poetry. But his poetry might be more accurately described by a phrase that, in a way, involves the art and the artist: and that is with the phrase "a quality of voice." Merwin first uses the term "voice", in 1956, in a poem from Green With Beasts ("Oh Voice that my demand is the newest name for").[41] But, I have borrowed the phrase from Merwin's Preface to his translation of Antonio Porchia's Voices (1969). In it, Merwin notes the literary antecedents that were thought to have influenced Porchia, all of which, it was finally determined, Porchia was unfamiliar with. So that any purported literary influence on what Porchia himself described as "emanations" that he had "heard and set down," Merwin says, "remains for the most part a matter of curiosity rather than a contribution to an assessment of the values and originality of Porchia's Voices." Merwin concludes, that "with no doctrinal allegiances, or any attempt at dogmatic system, Porchia's utterances are obviously, in this, a spiritual, quite as much as a literary testament."[42]

This is also a conclusion that I find to be unavoidable in an appraisal of Merwin's own poetry, and, particularly, that which begins with The Moving Target. This volume contains many poems that deal with the theme of poetic articulation. But one in particular, "Lemuel's Blessing," that I will discuss in a subsequent chapter, contains Merwin's literary manifesto, a manifesto which predates his translation of Porchia by more than six years, and one that also eschews, as Merwin always has, "doctrinal allegiances" and "dogmatic system[s]." However, to say that this poem contains Merwin's literary manifesto, although it is a partial truth, is, at this point, more in the nature of a convenience than a categorical statement.

The Lice, Merwin's seventh collection of poems, confirms the essential oral proclivity of his style. Its title is derived from the preliterate *Fragments* of Heraclitus, the riddling and aphoristic style of which characterizes that of the poems in *The Lice*. The familiar protest themes of *The Moving Target* continue to occupy Merwin in this volume. But its poems, even more than those in the previous volume, appear to deny any belief in discursive revelation, or to hold out any hope for humankind. As Jarold Ramsey notes, "What makes *The Lice* special in a decade of writing that will be remembered (if intelligence survives it) for its apocalyptic obsessions, is an eerie sense of bearing witness to a world already in mid-apocalypse."[43]

Most critics would agree with Ramsey. Many of the poems in *The Lice* afford a bleak picture of contemporary existence and, if possible, an even bleaker one of the future. But other poems, particularly those that delineate the continuation of Merwin's odyssey, show that he is not predicting an apocalyptic future but seeking ways to avert it. If there is one thing that is common to Merwin's protest themes, it is his censure of the divisive tendencies of modern man.

From the evidence of the poems throughout *The Lice*, it can be argued that Merwin is in the actual process of changing his own mind. Dissatisfied with "knowledge as we know it" and, characteristically, with his own poetic expression, he seeks other ways of knowing, and other ways of communicating. These ways are expressed in The Lice as much in "how" he says something as in "what" he says. The most obvious antecedent to the form of this expression is, as indicated by Merwin, to be found in the Fragments of Heraclitus.

The belief that a metamorphic principle governs the universe, "that everything flows," is central to both The Lice and the Fragments of Heraclitus. And the initial difficulties that Philip Wheelwright maintains confront a reader of the Fragments may well be among those which confront a reader of The Lice. The mind of modern man, he writes, has been largely conditioned by "the postulates of Cartesian dualism," so that the lack of "distinction among parts of speech," in the Fragments, and the "coalescence between concrete and abstract, and between subject and object, or knower and known, or thinker and thing thought," create difficulties that are not simply grammatical but ontological.[44] Wheelwright might well be describing the style of The Lice, and explaining the difficulties that some critics have experienced with Merwin's new style, and which, I think, have led some of them to characterize his poetry, too hastily, as surrealistic.

Merwin's exploration of preliterate modes of awareness continues in The Carrier of Ladders. The title is derived from a song of the Dahomeans, an ancient West African tribe, whose culture was decimated by imperialism. Intimating a cyclical view of history and, perhaps, implying that we are in a "time of trouble"[45] analogous to that of the Dahomeans, Merwin attempts to supply a link, or ladder, between the past and the present that allows us to partake of the wisdom of the past and to avoid its mistakes.

But, as I will show later, The Carrier of Ladders does not constitute an exploration of esoteric cultures or beliefs. It is wholly concerned with the American experience, and with the history that has nourished it. And if the responses to that experience, informed by preliterate modes of expression, seem somewhat alien at first, the poems remind us that they are more representative of the poetic imagination than of the reasoning mind, and that, historically and phylogenetically, similar responses have contributed to the matrix of Western thought.

In Merwin's two most recent collections, his odyssey continues. And although the style of his poetry remains generally unchanged, both books leave no doubt that Merwin is continuing, and will continue, to expand the forms of contemporary American poetry and, also, the possible responses to the future.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

[1] "To Name the Wrong," The Nation, February 24, 1962, p.176.

[2] For further biographical details, see "W. S. Merwin," in C. D. Kinsman, ed., Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1962).

[3] Selected Translations 1948-1968 (New York: Atheneum, 1979), p.viii.

[4] "W. S. Merwin," Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in The United States Since 1950 (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p.355.

[5] Selected Translations, p.vii.

[6] Rev. of A Mask for Janus, by W. S. Merwin, and another book, Furioso (Spring 1953), p.58.

[7] "Voice as Vision," rev. of The Dancing Bears, by W. S. Merwin, Western Review, X1X, 3 (Spring 1955), pp.235-39.

[8] "A Fair Sampling," rev. of Green With Beasts by W. S. Merwin, Prairie Schooner, XXXI, 3 (Fall 1957), pp.171-81.

[9] Quoted in David Ossman, "W. S. Merwin," The Sullen Art: Interviews by David Ossman with Modern American Poets (New York: Corinth Books, 1963), p.65.

[10] "W. S. Merwin" (1961), From Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Universal Library ed., 1971), p.143.

[11] Rev. of Green With Beasts, by W. S. Merwin, Poetry,

(May 1961), p.123.

[12] "W. S. Merwin," American Poetry Since 1945 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p.118.

[13] "The Moving Finger Writes," rev. of The Moving Target, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, The Hudson Review, 16, No.4 (Winter 1963-64), 625.

[14] "Some Questions of Precision," rev. of The Moving Target, by W. S. Merwin, Poetry, 104, No.3 (June 1964), 184.

[15] "Versions of Accident," rev. of The Moving Target, by W. S. Merwin, and another book, Kenyon Review, 26, No.3 (Summer 1964), 583.

[16] "Sighting The Moving Target," Kayak, No.3 (1964-65), pp.50-57.

[17] Rev. of The Lice, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, The Hudson Review, XX, 4 (Winter 1967-68), p.695.

[18] "The Writing on the Void: The Poetry of W. S. Merwin," The Iowa Review, 1, No.3 (Summer 1970), p.92; his emphasis.

[19] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin: 'What Has Escaped Us We Bring With Us,'" The Massachusetts Review, 14 (Summer 1973), pp.569-90.

[20] Rev. of The Lice, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, Prairie Schooner, XLII, 3 (Fall 1968), pp.269-71.

[21] "The Dwelling of Disappearance: W. S. Merwin's The Lice," Modern Poetry Studies, 3, No.3 (1972), 131.

[22] " 'Tireless Quest': A Conversation with W. S. Merwin,"

ed. Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, English Record, 19 (February 1969), p.11.

[23] Rev. of The Lice, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, Shenandoah, XIX, 3 (Spring 1968), p.68.

[24] "A Gathering of Poets," rev. of The Carrier of Ladders, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, The Western Humanities Review, XXV, 2 (Spring 1971), p.187.

[25] "A Poetry of Darkness," rev. of The Carrier of Ladders and The Miner's Pale Children, by W. S. Merwin, The Nation, December 14, 1970, p.634.

[26] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," p.590.

[27] Cooperman, p.269.

[28] "Canso," The Dancing Bears, by W. S. Merwin (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954), p.76.

[29] "Lemuel's Blessing," The Moving Target, by W. S. Merwin (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p.8.

[30] "Envoy From D'Aubigné," The Carrier of Ladders, by W. S. Merwin (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p.34.

[31] "For A Dissolving Music," A Mask for Janus, by W. S. Merwin (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1952), p.25.

[32] Ibid.

[33] "The Poetry of W. S. Merwin," Twentieth Century Literature, 16 (1970), p.278.

[34] "A Sparrow Sheltering Under a Column of the British Museum," Green With Beasts, by W. S. Merwin (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p.60.

[35] "Poetry in the Vernacular and Otherwise," rev. of The Drunk in the Furnace, by W. S. Merwin, and other books, Voices: A Journal of Poetry, 176 (Fall 1961), p.53.

[36] The Drunk in the Furnace, by W. S. Merwin (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1960), pp.41,40.

[37] "Death Camps of the Free World," rev. of The Lice, by W. S. Merwin, The Nation, September 16, 1968, p.254.

[38] "Green With Poems," The Princeton Library Chronicle, XXV, 1 (Autumn 1963), pp.89-94.

[39] The Dancing Bears, p.74.

[40] The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth, amended and enlarged ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966), p.235.

[41] Green With Beasts, p.71.

[42] Voices, trans. W. S. Merwin (Chicago: Big Table Publishing Co., 1969), pp.6-9.

[43] Ramsey, p.571.

[44] Heraclitus (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), pp.12-16.

[45] The Carrier of Ladders, see epigraph.

CHAPTER TWO - A GRAMMAR OF RETURN: THE FIRST FOUR BOOKS

The title of Merwin's first collection of poems, A Mask for Janus (1952), is an emblem of his intentions. Originally invoked to banish evil spirits from doorways, Janus (cf. L ianua, "a gate") evolved into the Roman household god of entrances and then into the god of all beginnings, named first in all prayers and invoked at the start of the day, the month, and the year. He was generally depicted with two faces gazing in opposite directions; according to William Sherwood Fox, the implication was that "his domain lay both before and behind him."[1]

Merwin's first poems record the beginnings of an odyssey that leads him through Europe, like Eliot, compelled to "fare forward" ("The Dry Salvages," III).[2] But, Janus-like, he also travels back into history, exploring in the old world many traditional avenues of lyrical expression: Provençal sestina, ballad, roundeau, and cançion. "With his concerns for the traditional conceptions of Western culture as expressed in its myths," W. H. Auden says in his Foreword to A Mask for Janus (p.ix),[3] Merwin "combines an admirable respect for its traditions of poetic craftsmanship."

A recurrent theme throughout Merwin's poetry is that of the difficulty of communication and, particularly, that of poetic articulation; "What fable [from L fabula, fari, "to speak"] should I tell them,/ That they would believe me?" he asks in "When I Came From Colchis" (The Dancing Bears, p.21).

It is a common theme, and one that Merwin shares, most notably, with Eliot. Merwin's exploration of this theme is embodied in a figurative odyssey that forms the nucleus of his early work and parallels his own literal travels. This journey is figuratively rendered in the exploration of lyric forms, but it also provides the subject matter of many poems.

The opening poems of A Mask for Janus, "Anabasis (I)" and "Anabasis (II)"--whose titles denote a beginning, a march forward or an advance--invite a comparison with Anabasis, by St.-John Perse, which Eliot first translated in 1930 and then revised in 1949. The similarities between the two-part poem of St.-John Perse and Merwin's pair are significant enough to reconsider how Eliot and others assessed Perse's Anabasis as a contribution to the development of modern poetry. In each of these poems, there are neither geographical references nor identifiable allusions; they transcend not only geographical boundaries but temporal ones as well. This could create difficulties for some readers, particularly difficulties of interpretation. Eliot anticipated such problems in connection with Anabasis; in his Preface (1930), he praises the poet's "abbreviation of method," what he terms the "suppression of 'links in the chain,' of explanatory and connecting matter," and testifies that there is a "logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts."[4] Eliot's comments are brief, but he appends with his translation what he considers to be one of the best introductions to the poem, that by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who sees in it the personification of a struggle in which language itself is at stake. It is a struggle, he says, waged by poets such as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, against the "predominance of reason" and the "lucidity of the written word." It is a struggle, he adds, renewed by St.-John Perse, "for a free syntax, for richer and more daring metaphors, for closer ties with the music of the epoch," and for the "renewal of lyrical inspiration from the heart of language itself."[5]

St.-John Perse had a marked effect on the development of modern poetry. It was his poetry, Anna Balakian claims in The Symbolist Movement, that established a "rendezvous between the prose poem and free verse."[6] Eliot is similarly attempting to expand the province of poetry in order to accommodate such innovations when, in the Preface to Anabasis, he argues: "poetry may occur . . . at any point along a line of which the formal limits are 'verse' and 'prose.'"[7]

Merwin's "Anabasis" poems partake of this tradition, and can be read not only as the proclamation of his odyssey, but as an acknowledgment of his artistic persuasion. His "Anabasis" poems also relinquish "explanatory and connecting matter" for a "free syntax, for richer and more daring metaphors" and "the magic of sound and rhythm."[8] We hear resonances, rather than recognize allusions, with such disparate poems as Homer's Odyssey and Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." These resonances are experienced as "a feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling," invigorating what Eliot calls the "auditory imagination."[9]

Such elements are an essential part of Merwin's poetry. In A Mask for Janus, for instance, there is no explicit indication that he is exploring his literary heritage, or giving his views on the subject of poetry. His treatment of subjects is, like that of Perse, metaphorical. Certain traditional forms, which he employs throughout the book, indicate that he might be. But, more often, familiar cadences and rhythms, like echoes of the past, obliquely confirm that this is his intention. This is why Eliot's comment on Perse's Anabasis, that there is a "logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts," and, also, Hofmannsthal's claim that Perse's Anabasis represents a struggle against the "predominance of reason" and the "lucidity of the written word," seem particularly applicable to Merwin's "Anabasis" poems, in which a sensory awareness will reveal as much or more than a cognitive one.

Merwin's "Anabasis (I)" begins with a conjunction, "Then," in medias res, symbolizing that he is coming "into the middle" of this tradition, and to a point at which he is free to move backward and forward in his exploration of his literary heritage. "Anabasis (I)" maintains a fairly consistent tetrameter line and regular rhyme scheme; "Anabasis (II)" changes to a pentameter line, but maintains the rhyme scheme. These lyric conventions assert a kinship with the European literary tradition, although Merwin is much more concerned with the present, as the opening lines indicate:

"Then we poised, in time's fullness brought/ As to a new country, the senses" (p.1). The collective "we" includes the oral tradition and its lyric poets: the "Speech no longer understood" (p.2); the "tall fables of strangers" (p. 3); the "covenant we could but seize/ Fractionally by the _ear_" (p.3; emphasis mine). But it also includes the poet who, though he is mortally "Fixed to bone" (p.8), seeks to become an immortal singer who "Believed a garden and reserve where swung/ The fruits that from all hungers immunize" (p. 7). He is one who would "seek a new dimension for the world" (p.8).

In a "final place" (p.4)--probably the present, at which point we are continuously arriving--he finds "No oratory, no welcome" (p.1), only "degradations, false music" (p. 2). Oratory (cognate with L _os_, _oris_, "mouth") was transformed by the written word. At one time, it was admired as an art form, "not as a recitation but as an oral composition."[10] Even at this point in Merwin's poetry, although it becomes much clearer later on, he seems to be objecting to written forms of poetry as "false music," or as a "degradation," a step down from "oratory." What he is objecting to is the codification of forms. But since the form that his objection takes is itself metaphorical, it remains open to interpretation. However, as I pointed out in Chapter One, his rejection of one form, the ossified "cynghanedd," in "For a Dissolving Music," is indisputable. Beyond this, it is entirely possible, and I think probable, that the form itself should be regarded as a metaphor.

For instance, in "A Dance of Death," Merwin uses the "sain," a consonantal form of the "cynghanedd" involving both rhyme and alliteration,[11] in a seventy-one line, monorhyme poem. This poem, also, involves the theme of poetic articulation in relation to the European heritage. Because any extended monorhyme is likely to become monotonous, it has traditionally been used as a device for producing satire or humor. But, assuming in this particular case that Merwin is familiar with Robert Graves' The White Goddess, the use of this ossified form may well satirize not only the form itself but a facet of the European tradition that Merwin rejects in favor of a more liberated and "imaginative" mode. This is what Graves has to say about the medieval use of forms:

> By way of historical introduction, a clear distinction must first be drawn between the court-bards and the wandering minstrels of ancient Wales. The Welsh bards, or master-poets, like the Irish, had a professional tradition, embodied in a corpus of poems which, literally memorized and carefully weighed, they passed on to the pupils who came to study under them. . . . the young poet was spared the curse of having doubtfully to build up his poetic lore for himself by hap-hazard reading, consultation with equally doubtful friends, and experimental writing. . . . When the Welsh poets were converted to orthodox Christianity and subjected to ecclesiastical discipline--a process completed by the tenth century, as the contemporary Welsh Laws show--their tradition gradually ossified. Though a high degree of technical skill was still required of master-poets and the Chair of Poetry was hotly contested in the various Courts, they were pledged to avoid what the Church called

> 'untruth', meaning the dangerous exercise of poetic imagination in myth or allegory. Only certain epithets and metaphors were authorized; themes were similarly restricted, metres fixed, and Cynghanedd, the repetitive use of consonantal sequences with variation of vowels, became a burdensome obsession. . . . (p.18).

Whether or not Merwin would agree entirely with Graves, he would not disagree, and as a student of medieval literature he is likely to have already known, that the "cynghanedd" is an ossified poetic form. And the fact that he uses it in "For a Dissolving Music," and "A Dance of Death," is, I suspect, not just to satirize an ossified form but to reject a moribund tradition. But Merwin's own metaphorical style, within the confines of this ossified form, is analogous to that of St.-John Perse and the post-Symbolists, and precludes any final judgment of his intentions.

To return to the "Anabasis" poems, which become more meaningful through reflexive reference (as does most of Merwin's poetry), their conclusion leaves little doubt that Merwin conceives of himself as a mariner whose attachment to a tradition, in the poem a "continent," or that which in one sense contains but in another sense represses, has been carefully considered and is likely to be temporary:

> Still we are strange to orisons and knees.
> Fixed to bone only, foreign as we came,
> We float leeward till the mind and body lose
> The uncertain continent of a name (p.8).

Both meanings of "orison," speech and prayer (cognate with L os, oris, "mouth") are now rare. Yet, they assure us that the poet considers his vocation to be a sacred calling.

The next poem in A Mask for Janus is "Rime of the Palmers." The historic subject matter and the archaic spelling of "rhyme" return us again to the past, to a time in which wandering votaries propagated their faith with song, or with the spoken word. Traditional mnemonic devices, such as a series of rhyming quatrains and an interpolation[13] (e.g. "--Form is a thing goes slyly/ And escapes our ears--"), remind us of poetry's roots in the oral world, while its form remains a part of the literary heritage:

> Our motion is our form
> And our passage raiment;
> Between stillness and time
> We pass, improvident.
>
> --Form is a thing goes slyly
> And escapes our ears;
> In another country
> What did you love, palmers,
>
> And what do you remember
> This morning and light?
> --We go (may wonder
> Send and receive our feet)
>
> Half-remembering
> Where our bones were hid (p.10).

The kinship of music and poetry is reaffirmed, though we are reminded that the age of singing votaries is past, that literacy has effectively muted their song: "--A word is a little thing,/ And the letter kills,/ And you are far who sing/ From the morning hills" (p.12). An echo here of 2 Cor. 3.6, "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life," renews the contrast between the law and the spirit, the old and the new covenants, and the contrast between two methods of interpretation, literal and metaphorical. This poem, and Merwin's poetry in general, reasserts the primacy of the breath, or the spoken word. However, the predominance in our age of the written word, which fosters habits of literal interpretation, perpetuates the contrast. Although the "palmers" have gone, language remains. But it has lost, Merwin implies, and it has been allowed to lose, some of its metaphoric vitality: "the word was morning once/ That is now common day (p.13).

One of the most celebrated poems in A Mask for Janus, "Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge," continues the exploration of this theme and, also, of Merwin's figurative odyssey. This poem is also concerned with communication and with the exigencies of form, figured in the poem as a "vessel" (p.43). The key words in the title, "dictum" and "masque," assert the distinction of "told" versus "shown," of "oratory" versus "drama." The poem demonstrates the virtues of both, although artistic development, "growth," is deemed "topiary" or ornamental. And Merwin's use of aureate diction facilitates this judgment.

"Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge" is a dramatic poem. A stage is set, and a speaker prepares to speak: "There will be the cough before the silence, then"; the line-ending achieves a dramatic pause and elicits "Expectation; and the hush of portent" (p.42). But "with talk, like a blather of rain, begun,/ Weather will break and the artful world will rush/ Incontinent." Therefore:

> There must be a vessel.
> There must be rummage and shuffling for salvation
> Till on that stage and violence, among

Curtains of tempest and shaking sea,
A covered basket, where a child might lie,
Timbered with osiers and floating on a shadow,
Glides adrift, as improbably sailing
As a lotus flower bearing a bull (p.43).

A form that is merely ornamental, "topiary" (p.42), is not equal to its task, and "Glides adrift, as improbably sailing/ As a lotus flower bearing a bull." The poet reflects, in a monologue that is charged with metaphor, on exigencies that alternately attract and repel him:

Hills are to be forgotten; the patter of speech
Must lilt upon flatness. The beasts will come;
And as they come, let one man, by the ark,
Drunken with desolation, his tongue
Rounding the full statement of the seasons,
Tremble and stare, his eyes seeming to chase
A final clatter of doomed crows, to seek
An affirmation, a mercy, an island,
Or hills crested with towns, and to find only
Cities of cloud already crumbling.

And these the beasts: the bull from the lotus flower
With wings at his shoulders; and a goat, winged;
A serpent undulating in the air;
A lion with wings like falling leaves;
These are to wheel on a winged wheel above
The sullen ark, while hare, swine, crocodile,
Camel and mouse come; and the sole man, always,
Lurches on childish limbs above the basket--
To his mere humanity seas shall not attain
With tempest, nor the obscure sky with torches
(p.44).

Both Moses's ark of bulrushes, "A covered basket, where a child might lie,/ Timbered with osiers" (p.43), and Noah's ark connote a means of salvation for the poet and a vessel for his poetics, but they retain their metaphoric ambience. More than a decade later, in "Notes for a Preface," Merwin speaks of the poet as a "summoner" who endeavors "to call the next real creatures from the ark."[14] And in "Dictum: For a

Masque of Deluge," it is not the fabled beasts of "topiary" creation who are called from the ark, nor the paired beasts with their promise of procreation, but poetry itself, whose "best motions" can only ever be forms, "figments on the drapery of the air" (p.45). This alone is the progeny of the "sole man" who "Lurches on childish limbs above the basket" (p.44). In a parenthetical aside he asks:

> (Why is it rumored that these beasts come in pairs
> When the anatomies of their existence
> Are wrought for singularity? They walk
> Beside their shadows; their best motions are
> Figments on the drapery of the air.
> Their propagation is a redoubling
> Merely of dark against the wall, a planetary
> Leaning in the night unto their shadows
> And stiffening to the moment of eclipse;
> Shadows will be their lean progeny.) (p.45).

The flood subsides and the poet, though "solitary, impoverished," is "renewed" by the sustenance of art:

> At last the sigh of recession: the land
> Wells from the water; the beasts depart; the man
> Whose shocked speech must conjure a landscape
> As of some country where the dead years keep
> A circle of silence, a drying vista of ruin,
> Musters himself, rises, and stumbling after
> The dwindling beasts, under the all-colored
> Paper rainbow, whose arc he sees as promise,
> Moves in an amazement of resurrection,
> Solitary, impoverished, renewed (p.45).

Traditionally, a "masque" is followed by a general revel in which the audience joins the unmasked revelers. But the poet remains committed to his odyssey and must "before that revel/ . . . teach an order and rehearse the days/ Till the days are accomplished" (p.46). In other words, Merwin is not yet ready to remove the mask of a more or less traditional poetics, or to celebrate his own performance. He is still exploring his heritage and must, he implies, continue to do so.

The tone of the last stanza in the poem is somewhat ominous, particularly the final lines, which suggest another flood; the rhythm of these lines, most ending in curt monosyllables, moves the poem toward a decisive resolution:

> A falling frond may seem all trees. If so
> We know the tone of falling. We shall find
> Dictions for rising, words for departure;
> And time will be sufficient before that revel
> To teach an order and rehearse the days
> Till the days are accomplished: so now the dove
> Makes assignations with the olive tree,
> Slurs with her voice the gestures of the time:
> The day foundering, the dropping sun
> Heavy, the wind a low portent of rain (p.46).

An essential ambiguity dominates this conclusion, which suggests not only an end but, also, a new beginning. This is characteristic of most of Merwin's early work in which he seeks his own poetic style by exploring the traditional forms of his heritage.

There are many poems in A Mask for Janus that explore mythic materials in intricate closed forms. Together, they demonstrate Merwin's erudition and his craftsmanship. But, more importantly, they are the calends of his odyssey. He had chosen to go back, to navigate the known, before exploring the unknown. Richard Wilbur has suggested that perhaps some of these poems are "merely exercises,"[15] but the suspicion is unwarranted. Both the book's title, which prepares us for a circumambient journey, and also the epigraph by John Wheelwright preclude such a possibility: "Habit is evil, all habit, even speech,/ And promises prefigure their own breech."[16] The early poems are not "habit," not mere imitative exercises, but a viable exploration of traditional forms.

The title of Merwin's second book, *The Dancing Bears* (1954), is derived from Flaubert's despondent observation, given as an epigraph, that human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes to make bears dance, though we wish they could move the stars.[17] Eliot made the phrase and the sentiment even more familiar in his "Portrait of a Lady:

> And I must borrow every changing shape
> To find expression . . . dance, dance
> Like a dancing bear,
> Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.[18]

The title shows that Merwin will continue to explore his literary heritage and the theme of poetic articulation. This is also confirmed by the first poem in the volume, "Tower." The poet returns to a country that has no ground in the material world, but which, though nameless, we share: it is a "common [from L *communis*; cf. "communicate"] country" (p.9).[19] "Now I have come again/ To the common country," he says, "Where all faces are mirrors and tell me/ I return white-faced as the dawn./ Have I outrun belief/ And walk in a superstition?" In an imaginary landscape, he stands before an ethereal tower "Hung with no flutter of birds,/ Puff of smoke or banner." He calls out, but "No echo stirred nor answer,/ Pin nor shutter, only/ By the door a hanging wheel/ In no wind was turning slowly" (p.10).

Only silence greets the poet, as it does in Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners." But here any similarity between the poems ends. The silence in "The Listeners" is simply declared, whereas in Merwin's poem it is, though paradoxically, recreated:

> Round and still as a finger
> Laid upon lips, stone
> Above stone, the tower. Its shadow
> Fell as far as evening.
>
> Dark spool wound within silence,
> Ringed with stillness as with trees
> --Birches stood hushed in the green air,
> And moat-lapped apple trees.
>
> Polished were the dark stones;
> As ice they rose. Is it
> That there the crevices
> Run at neck-level always,
>
> That where that water stands
> Almost as ice, the rippling
> Tails of salmon cut
> The throats of all reflection? (p.10).

A stream of sibilants, which includes a dozen voiceless palatal fricatives (sh), call for a silence that only a "deceitful magpie" (p.12), the archetypal chatterer, breaks.

The account in Genesis 11. 1-9 of the destruction of the tower of Babel, and the confounding of a universal tongue, provides the archetype from which we derive our failure to communicate. But Merwin's poem is a more personal account of his frustrations as a poet: "Have I outrun belief/ And walk in a superstition?" (p.9). These frustrations do not deter him; they force him to explore further. When, in the opening lines, he says "Now I have come again/ To the common country," we realize that his diction in The Dancing Bears is more common and is more easily shared than that in his previous volume. At no point in this volume, for instance, do we find the level of diction contained in A Mask for Janus, which requires at times a knowledge of several languages including Latin ("Et, ecce, nunc in pulvere dormio") and a familiarity with some rather archaic words ("bier," "hind," "euphory," "saeculum," etc.). In The Dancing Bears Merwin has, as Richard Howard points out, "developed a more accessible idiom."[20] And this is true of his syntax as well as his diction. But Merwin does not abandon his exploration of the lyric tradition and its oral substratum. The preoccupation with speech, and with poetic articulation, continues to develop this theme.

"You, Genoese Mariner" (pp.22-23), Merwin's oblique address to himself and to Columbus, whose face was also "A mask about a vision" and who, too, had journeyed far in search of "gilt and spice," describes a circumambient and ultimately futile journey for both men: "I, after so long,/ Who have been as wrong as you."

Similarly, in "Proteus," he wrestles with the god of changing forms until noon, when the god's strength subsides. But he realizes that he has conquered nothing, though he has gained in understanding:

> The sun had fought
> Almost to noon when I felt the beast's sinews
> Fail, the beast's bristles fall smooth
> Again to the skin of a man. I loosed him then.
> The head he turned toward me wore a face of mine.

> Here was no wisdom but my own silence
> Echoed as from a mirror; no marine
> Oracular stare but my own eyes
> Blinded and drowned in their reflections;
> No voice came but a voice we shared, saying,
> "You prevail always, but, deathly, I am with you
> Always." I am he, by grace of no wisdom,
> Who to no end battles the foolish shapes
> Of his own death by the insatiate sea (pp.63-64).

It is a struggle within himself to formulate his own poetics.

The three poems at the end of this volume, each entitled "Canso," contain the essence of the Provençal love song. But they are not, in any literal sense, the song of a troubadour for his love. Like the song of the Palmers, the canso of the oral world has gone, and the song of the poet has been tamed by print. It exists in a book, or, as it is expressed figuratively in one canso, in a "dark room where the pictures hang/ On the silence as though it were a wall" (p.73).

The theme of the artist's alienation is a common one and flourishes in the world of printed forms. But Merwin is not, as he says in the same "Canso," an "impresario of emptiness/ Swaying before defection" (p.74). Language is living, and he reflects:

> If you, if you my word and so my life
> And so the mode and vessel of my death,
> Should die before me, I would not go
> --Although turned phantom by your truancy--
> Calling the earth of you; neither, impelled
> By what pain, soever, with a zeal
> As of an antiquarian, cull, compose
> At last a vacancy of you and there become
> An impresario of emptiness
> Swaying before defection. What are the patterned
> Potsherds to him who knows what wine there was?
>
> It is not the comforts of a chiliast,
> Nor of a mind mnemonic and apart
> As an old man rocking in his doorway at

Irrelevant evening that I would wish to hear
Mumbling, "There was a world, there was, as it were,
A world wherein she walked once and was loved.
Is this, among worlds, not similar? And if
A tree wherein a throstle sang should lose
Not leaves but the bird only, would it not
Be, though without that singing, yet as green
As ever?" It would be the tree had died (p.74).

The final phrase is unexpected. It breaks the rhythm and sonority of the preceding lines. It is terse, blunt and illogical. But Merwin is not concerned with logic, but with metaphor. It is between "twin antinomies" (p.77) that he mediates. He conceives of resurrecting the "word" as "flesh," to be "as breath again" (p.75). The argument, only a segment of which follows, takes the form of an extended interior monologue. Subjects interchange metaphorically, one growing out of the other:

Unless you also in that animal
Constraint of death having become
Incredible, might nevertheless by such
Enchantment, as once by love, but changelessly,
Be tamed out of that emptiness, and come
To stand again, as in flesh, in a place
Of possibility. Unless there be
Within the figure of mortality
This mind of heaven whereby I may
Fashion the lips and be as breath again
In the mouth in which you were a word.

Or may the mind of heaven be a mind
Of questions? As: is there not a country
Or the negation of a country, where
The mortal tree where the bird sang, the season
Where you walked living, once existed only
In their own deaths before their tides and branches
Were from negation made? It is that world
That I would have wherein you might be loved,
And I would seek it in its own death, and shape
Its life out of your death, for it must be
Created out of the nothing that you are (p.75).

It is at this point in Merwin's poetry that the theme of the "word" made "flesh" is given the fullest expression. However, the general form of that expression, particularly in contrast to the theme, remains contiguous with written tradition. (One might write, but is not likely to say, "neither, impelled by what pain soever"; and in speech one would probably seek a simpler term for "chiliast"). However, the "world," of the written tradition, as the preceding stanza makes clear, is not the "world" that the poet "would have." The conflict is real, whether it is described as ambiguity within the poem or as the poet's ambivalence; one is an analogue of the other. And, therefore, his odyssey must continue:

> There must be found, then, the imagination
> Before the names of things, the dicta for
> The only poem, and among all dictions
> That ceremony whereby you may be named
> Perpetual out of the anonymity
> Of death. I will make out of my grief
> A river, and my rage shall be the coin
> To catch its ferryman; out of my fear
> A dog shall spring; I will fling my bitterness
> To stop his throats. I will myself become
> A Hades into which I can descend (p.76).

The form that Merwin's poetics will take is, even at this point, being shaped:

> It will be a domain of déjà-vus,
> The final most outlandish fastness of
> Familiarity without memory,
> Whose set dimensions, whose mode of privacy
> And mode of pain I with my living breath
> Shall enter, saying, "Like an Icarus
> I have fallen into my shadow." There shall be seen
> The death of the body walking in shapes of bodies,
> Departure's self hid in a guise of sojourn,
> As it seems among the living. But on those hills
> The shadows of sheep are folded, not the sheep
> (p.76).

Anyone familiar with Merwin's poetry, particularly his recent poetry, will agree that it is a "domain of déjà-vus,/ The final most outlandish fastness of/ Familiarity without memory," formed with the "breath." We catch the cadence of a hymn that we thought we had forgotten, the rhythms of a nursery rhyme, or clichés and distant idioms, all somehow reanimated: "A place of recognition, though it be/ Of recognition of nothing; a place of knowledge/ Though it be knowledge of nothing" (p.76). This is illustrated in his early work by echoes of traditional forms and meters. But, as will be apparent in his recent work, this technique is expanded considerably to involve all manner of literary and idiomatic echoes.

The "Canso" from which the preceding examples are taken is 275 lines long, too long to quote in its entirety. It is a dramatic and polemic monologue that includes echoes of Biblical and Greek mythology but, particularly, echoes of the quest myth of Orpheus, the minstrel whose song could summon animals, and which almost succeeded in resurrecting from the dead his young bride Eurydice. But she turned and looked back, just "once," and could not be saved. Alive, Eurydice is for Merwin the figurative embodiment of the spoken word; dead, though not utterly lost, she is the embodiment of the word tamed by print. Eurydice and the poem, the spoken and the written word, love and the song, are all metaphorically interrelated. Admittedly, it is not a point to be proved logically; the poem speaks for itself. These are the final stanzas:

> For it is you that are the world thereof
> You whom, possessing, I have still desired,
> And, touching, have still dreamed of; you the sense,
> The echo there waiting upon this word,
> The circle making all within it real,
> The sole order; for I have painfully
> Wrought you from vacancy to this full air
> And sung you to the tender instrument
> Of my ten fingers till you have become
> The poem in whose arbor we may kiss,
> The summer into which we can ascend.
>
> You know the story, its dénouement. You know
> Death is by definition a terrain
> Of no return save to itself, where all
> Appearances are voices calling, "Look
> Now, oh look if now only"; is a face whereon
> To look is to know loss; and what if I
> Should turn but once, and you vanish? The song is nothing
>
> If not a resurrection. Therein I sing you,
> Love, always more real, though in the fraying
> Edges of patience the teased harpies
> Hone the incredible silence against their tongues
> (pp.82-83).

The irresolution of the poem reflects the present state of the word: printed, it is figuratively dead until it is again resurrected by the breath.

In his next book, Green With Beasts (1956), which has three parts, the poems are even less formal and less stylized, although it would be futile to look for such differences at the beginning of one book or at the end of another. But the preoccupation with language, poems about poetry, and the exploration of traditional materials is less apparent. Two important exceptions, "The Annunciation" and "The Prodigal Son," will be discussed later in this chapter.

In Green With Beasts, Merwin is concerned more with the present, and his poems do not recount experiences as much as recreate them. They are direct, personal, and, many of them, autobiographical. The book begins with a dedicatory poem, "To Dido," which reads in part:

> With dumb belongings there can be
> The gesture that bestows, for its own reasons;
> Its mumbled inadequacy reminds us always
> In this world how little can be communicated.
> And for these, they too are only tokens
> Of what there is no word for: their worth
> Is a breath or nothing, and the spirit who can
> convey? (p.5)[21]

We are reminded that the voice of the poet is "dumb," but that it is also a breath, a "spirit" (from L spiritus, akin to L spirare, "to breathe").

The first part of this volume is entitled "Physiologus: Chapters for a Bestiary" (a physiologus, in medieval literature, is a collection of animal descriptions with religious or moral allegory). The first poem in this section is "Leviathan." Its opening lines, as Merwin points out in an interview, are a "deliberate echo of an Anglo-Saxon poem" about a whale, which is itself a thirteenth-century rendering from a Latin source.[22] "Leviathan" is a powerful poem, reminiscent of Pound's "The Seafarer." Like "The Seafarer," it has a number of yoked Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman words that contribute to the power of the poem. Merwin himself considered Pound to be a "dominant influence in his own work," Frank MacShane reports following an interview with Merwin; it was particularly "Pound's language which attracted Merwin --the odd blend in his poems of remote archaisms and contemporary speech."[23] But the similar blend of diction in

"Leviathan" cannot alone account for its power. Kenneth Andersen comments on its design:

> The calculated complexity and interwoven design of these first few lines is such that one can almost feel the whale bursting the bounds of the poetic form. Expecially [sic] significant are the alliterations of "black . . . brute . . . bulling"; "wave-wrack"; "shoulders spouting"; "fist . . . forehead"; and "gray . . . green": all of which catch the quality of characterization through forceful, consonantal repetition. In addition, the participles create trochaic and dactyllic rhythms of the brute whale bulling and thrashing through ancient sea-swells of motion.[24]

The format of these poems acknowledges an allegiance to a specific genre which extends from an early Greek work to a relatively modern one in G. Apollinaire's Bestiaire. It is quite impossible therefore to say anything more specific than that Merwin is again showing a penchant for a style which is traditionally symbolical or metaphorical. The poems themselves, "Blue Cockerel," "Two Horses," "Dog," and "White Goat, White Ram," which complete Part One of Green With Beasts, seem to assert a natural existence (a "physiologus") as poems. In "Blue Cockerel," Merwin evokes the bird's magnificent plumage, and its essential mystery, which is also that of a poem:

> Not Montezuma nor all
> The gold hills of the sun were ever so plumed
> As the blue of his neck, his breast's orange,
> his wings'
> Blazing, and the black-green sickles of his tail.
> It seems to be summer. But save for his blue hackles
> And the light haze of his back, there is no sky,
> Only the one tree spreading its green flame
> Like a new habit for heaven (p.13).

Then, he evokes the bird's primordial screech and the unblinking anonymity of its eye:

> A cry must be painted silent: the spread red hand
> Of his comb thrown back, beak wide, and the one eye
> Glaring like the sun's self (for there is no other),
> Like the sun seen small, seen rimmed in red secret,
> May be the shape of jubilation crowing,
> Or the stare and shriek of terror (p.13).

In these poems, the allegory is implicit, evoking the mystery not only of animal creation but that of poetic artifice. So that we can never be too sure if, in this poem, Merwin is referring to the "body" of the bird, the poem, or both:

> And whose body
> Is this in the foreground lying twisted sideways,
> Eyes glazed, whose stiff posture would become
> The contorted dead? Though its face gleams white
> It might be the self of shadow we have not seen,
> Night who was never here, or the hour itself
> There to be sung unmoved. Surely it is
> The eye's other centre, and upon this,
> This only, the bird stares, and for this cause
> Cries, cries, and his cry crashes
> Among the branches, the blades of great leaves
> Looming like towers, the fruits and petals, green
> Thickets of light deeper than shadows, the moon-white
> Ears of that body lying, and makes
> And lends echo and moment to all that green
> Watery silence. But does he scream
> In joy unfading that now no dark is,
> Or what wakening does he herald with all terror?
> (pp.13-14)

Part Two of Green With Beasts is untitled, and contains most of the poems in the volume--twenty-five of the thirty-nine. These poems anticipate the change in Merwin's style that occurs following the publication of The Drunk in the Furnace in 1960. We begin to notice more personal details, a loosening of the syntax, and the informal rhythms of colloquial speech. A pervasive, almost prosaic tone confers a texture of apparent simplicity. Together, these elements confirm the continuation of Merwin's odyssey. One poem that I mentioned in Chapter One, "A Sparrow Sheltering under a Column of the British Museum," metaphorically confirms Merwin's attachment to the literary tradition; the use of rhyming couplets is significant in this respect. But the poem also conveys that perhaps Merwin is beginning to feel, like the sparrow in the poem, somewhat domesticated:

> Conceived first by whom? By the Greeks perfected,
> By the Romans, the Rennaissance and the Victorians copied,
>
> Almost from the first more massive than our uses
> And so indicating something more, the stone rises
>
> Into the clear sunlight rare for a London January.
> Why about columns does it seem always windy?
>
> Still, he restores this one to bare use, convenient
> For huddling between its base and pediment
>
> Where though the wind still ruffles him it is somewhat broken.
> Porches are places of passage; and again
>
> To us they indicate something beyond; to him
> Its shape and position in the wind are the column.
>
> And whereas to him the feet of children and scholars
> Who pass all day through the merely useful doors
>
> To enquire of the rich uncertainty of their farthing
> Are not shaped like danger unless too near, may even bring
>
> Crumbs to offer to a necessity
> Which they both conciliate so differently,
>
> (He, alive not to limits but presences,
> They hungering less for shapes than significances)
>
> Skelton's bird or Catullus's, or even
> That pair whose fall figured our need of heaven
>
> Would mean nothing to him, for he would never
> Recognize them as now they are

Beyond doors there, where the wind is unknown,
But knows simply that this stone

Shelters, rising into the native air,
And that, though perhaps cold, he is at home there.

It can be argued that the equation of bird/poet is a tenuous one. At this point it might seem so. But reflexive reference, as will be apparent later, will confirm that the equation is justified. The poems at the end of Green With Beasts, particularly "Birds Waking," will illustrate this, but further metaphors of birds and of domesticity will make it certain.

There are two other poems in the center section of Green With Beasts that also illustrate the continuation of Merwin's odyssey ("The Prodigal Son") and, also, his belief that the source of all true poetry is the poet's breath ("The Annunciation"). Two or three critics have commented on these poems, but have placed too much literal significance on the Biblical allusions in the titles, and have assumed that the poems parallel, embellish, or further dramatize the mythology that informs them. Respectively, the poems allude to the parable in Luke 15.11, and to the account in Luke 1.26. But, apart from a surface similarity, the poems have no literal connection with these accounts. Both poems do, however, show a marked affinity with two poems by Eliot, "Gerontion" and Four Quartets. Each of the four poems, Merwin's and Eliot's, explores the theme of poetic articulation. And each has a common matrix, the opening words of the Johannine gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

God, and the Word was God."

Since there is such a marked affinity between Merwin's and Eliot's poems, it is worth reconsidering certain aspects of Eliot's verse before that of Merwin. Eliot's meditation, in "Gerontion," on the theme of the "unspeaking word" is well known:

> I an old man,
> A dull head among windy spaces.
>
> Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'
> The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
> Swaddled with darkness.[25]

Eliot is alluding to parables in John and Matthew which deal with faith and the spoken word. In John 4.48, Jesus admonishes a nobleman who will not believe what he has heard Jesus tell him: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." Similarly, in Matthew 12.38, certain scribes and Pharisees, after listening to Jesus, demonstrate the same lack of faith; "Master," they say, "we would see a sign from thee." Obviously, Eliot intended the allusions to further delineate the spiritual emptiness of the "old man" in "Gerontion," whose senses have been desiccated: "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch." He sits, in a "dry month" being "read to by a boy, waiting for rain." He ruminates upon fragments of secular and religious history that are meaningless to him: "Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season."

Merwin's poem "The Prodigal Son" inhabits a timeless dimension, like that of "Gerontion." The setting is similar, and identical images and word echoes confirm a kinship. In "The Prodigal Son," an "old man" (p.29) sits in the dry, dusty heat of an afternoon mediating between figments of substances: substances "of shining stillness" which "seem other than themselves,/ Seem fragments and faces half-seen through their own/ Glare, shaping another life, another/ Lifelessness that mirrors this as might/ Its own mirage" (p. 28). He sits, "brooding upon distance/ Upon emptiness." "His house behind him" is another figment of substance, "In which lifelong he has believed and filled/ With life, almost as a larger body" (p.29). Only some incessant "flies" seem real, and their presence confirms not the living but the living-dead--the "old man" over whom they crawl:

> The flies crawl
> Unnoticed over his face, through his drooping
> Beard, along his hands lying loose as his beard,
> Lying in his lap like drying leaves; and before him
> The smeared stalls of the beasts, the hens in the shade,
> The water-crane still at the well-head, the parched
> Fields that are his as far as the herdsman
> Are emptiness in his vacant eyes (p.29).

Any substance seems "like a breath just out of reach" (p.28), born and lost in the flow of time, "And the silence off on the hills might be an echo/ Of the silence here" (p.29). "The water-crane still at the well-head" becomes, later in the poem,"hushed." It is an interesting symbol which Graves, in The Greek Myths, connects with the earliest alphabetic characters: "Cranes were sacred to Hermes . . . protector of poets before Apollo usurped his power; and the earliest alphabetic characters were wedge-shaped. Palamedes ('ancient intelligence'), with his sacred crane (Martial: Epigrams xiii.75) was the Carian counterpart of the Egyptian god Thoth, inventor of letters, with his crane-like ibis; and Hermes was Thoth's early Hellenic counterpart."[26]

The son has departed, himself only an "image" of departure, bearing with him "all that could be carried/ Of his inheritance" (p.31). Merwin himself is the prodigal son of the poem; Eliot is his spiritual father. The house in which lifelong the father "has believed and filled/ With life, almost as a larger body" is the poetic tradition, the son's inheritance, the "breath just out of reach." And the son's departure is another figurative rendering of Merwin's own odyssey. It is similar to that which, many years before, led to Eliot's return to his ancestral home, England. The son left,

> Looking for something his father had not given,
> Delights abroad, some foreign ease, something
> Vague because distant, which he must give
> Himself, something indeed which he carried,
> Unknowing, already with him; or, say, an ampler
> Body, an assured content, something
> Which, unknowing, he was leaving behind, yet
> Which he had to leave to be able to find. And wasted
> His substance in wild experiment and found
> Emptiness only, found nothing in distance,
> Sits finally in a sty and broods
> Upon emptiness, upon distance (p.31).

This is a harsh self-assessment.

The second half of the poem is a mirror image of the first. Identical words and images "mirror" the spiritual malaise of both the father and the son and, analogically, that of Eliot and Merwin:

> Except
> For the flies hovering and crawling before

His eyes, insisting that the afternoon
He sees is there, the dusty grass, the unholy
Swine, the shared husks, the shared hut shining
Like brass in the oddest places might be a mirage
Merely in which he had no part, a strange
Vista made of familiar pieces caught
In an odd light in a mirror, an image
Of emptiness out of a restive day-dream
Gone wrong at home; unreal, if he could turn
The mirror, open his eyes. And all between
This hour and corner where he sits and his father's
Door that day when he walked away, surely
Is unreal, a picture in which he has no part,
Leading to this--the loud junketings, the women,
The silks, columns, the intricate pleasure
Of generosity; his mind turns among
Those vacancies as a mirror hung by a string
In a ruin. Distance might be dead
Except for the flies, and instead of the emptiness
On which he stares, the backs of the sleeping swine
Might be the far hills beyond the hens,
Beyond the hushed water-crane and the fields
By his father's house; the shade where he sits
Be the ruled shadow of the white wall, or at least
He might be lying just out of reach under
A tree among the herders; oh except
For the flies' insistence, the sty must be
A heap of ashes, and the swineherd's fouled garment
Sackcloth (pp.31-32).

Unlike Eliot's "Gerontion," which ends with images of despair, Merwin's "The Prodigal Son" ends affirmatively:

So in the empty frame of an old man's
Mind the figments of afternoon
Wait between a substance that is not theirs
And an illusion that is another's: the herders
Wait on the hills, the dusty olives, the fields,
Well-crane and white walls are a held
Breath waiting; and the dozing calf
Fattens and waits, the other sons asleep
With their wives in complacent dreams
Wait in emptiness and do not know
That it is emptiness, that they are waiting,
That the flies are wrong and hover in nothing,
That distance is dead, that in the same mirage
Nearer than the flies or the herders, the lost son,
Hesitant, stumbling among the swine (unto this
Has been likened the kingdom of heaven) hoping
For little, takes the first step toward home
(p.32).

Eliot's affirmation comes later, in Four Quartets, when he returns to his ancestral home in "East Coker" and we hear the parable of the prodigal son echoed again: "And what there is to conquer/ By strength and submission, has already been discovered/ Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope/ To emulate--but there is no competition--/ There is only the fight to recover what has been lost/ And found and lost again and again."[27]

In "The Prodigal Son" there are repeated references to the "kingdom of heaven," which in Matthew is likened variously to: "a man who sowed good seed" (13.24), "a grain of mustard seed" (13.31), "leaven" (13.33), "a merchant man, seeking fine pearls" (13.45), and "a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind" (13.47). But the most apt simile for this poem, in light of Merwin's exploration and renewal of the tradition, is found at the end of Matthew: "every scribe who is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a man that is an householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old" (13.52). The kinship between the poetry of Eliot and Merwin obliquely confirms Eliot's view that "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it."[28]

"The Annunciation" is also concerned with the "Word." As Anthony Libby points out, Merwin "exploits a traditional myth for its metaphoric possibilities." But, Libby adds: "even the old abstracter Eliot conveys, in Four Quartets, a more convincing sense of Christian mythology, doubtless because for him the myth is really believable."[29] Similarly, John Vogelsang says:

> "The Annunciation" begins in a stillness that is similar to "The Prodigal Son," but instead of a present tense reverberating with loss, the event is recounted--it is past and is brought into the present as something that has happened and has been lost. Again Merwin discovers in a Biblical story, this time the Holy Spirit descending to Mary to bring about the incarnation of Jesus, forms for his poetics. But whereas the Bible tells of how the divine knowledge is conveyed to man--God through the Holy Spirit speaks the word Jesus and Jesus becomes incarnate as the salvation of man is guaranteed--Merwin presents the Annunciation with overtones of rape and unsolvable mystery. It is almost like Yeats's "Leda and the Swan."[30]

Libby's dissatisfaction follows logically, though without justification, from the assumption that Merwin's poem is simply a poetic rendition of the Annunciation recounted in Luke 1.26-38. Consequently, he demands "a more convincing sense of Christian mythology." I am not convinced that Eliot was an "old abstracter," nor that Christian mythology was any more believable for him than it is for Merwin, because Merwin's religious beliefs have not yet been established. Vogelsang, who includes Joseph and the Holy Trinity in his exegesis, reasons that because of God's mercy "Mary can experience this ultimate and live." But, he adds, "as the rest of the poem proves, the mercy is problematic; it mitigates and mediates rather than allows the full experience."[31] The assumptions of Libby and Vogelsang are themselves problematic.

The biblical account of the Annunciation offers Merwin a primal metaphor through which he explores the mystery of poetic inspiration, that moment in which the "Spirit" breathes into, or "inspires," the poet. Doubtless, the memory of that moment, as Merwin observes in "Notes for a Preface" (though not in reference to this poem), will be "as tragically partial as that of any particular moment of sex, and doubtless he [the poet] knows that the instances, as they were real, are unrepeatable."[32] What would be necessary for the poem, Merwin says elsewhere, would be "an unduplicatable resonance, something that would be like an echo."[33] "The Annunciation" does not recount the moment of inspiration, but "echoes" it:

> It was a word for
> The way the light and the things in the light
> Were looking into the darkness, and the darkness
> And the things of the darkness were looking into
> the light
> In the fullness, and the way the silence
> Was hearing, like it was hearing a great song
> And the song was hearing the silence forever
> And forever and ever. And I knew the name for it;
> There in the place where I was nothing in
> The fullness, I knew it, and held it and knew
> The way of it, and the word for how it was one,
> I held it, and the word for why. Or almost,
> Or believed I knew it, believed, like an echo
> That when it comes you believe you know
> The word, while it rings, but when it is gone
> You had not learned it, and cannot find it, even
> Though the sound still breathes in your ear. Because
> Then the light looked away from the darkness
> Again, and the song slid into the silence
> And was lost again, and the fullness rose, going,
> And the sound of its going was the sound of wings
> Rushing away in darkness, and the sound
> That came after them was the stillness rushing
> Again, and time sudden and hard to believe,
> And forever was emptiness again, where time fell,
> And I was standing there in myself, in the light,
> With only the shape of the word that is wonder,
> And that same cup still in my hands.

And I could not say how long it had been
That I had stood there forever, while the end
Looked into the beginning, and they were one
And the word for one. Because the shadow
Had not changed on the stone, and nothing had moved
In all that time, if it was in time at all,
Because nothing had changed. But I did not doubt
For the wonder that was in me, quickening,
Like in your ear the shape of a sound
When the sound is gone. And because when
At last I moved my hand, slowly, slowly,
Like it could not believe, to touch myself, to see
If it could be true, if I had truly come back
From the light, and touched myself like something
Hard to believe, I knew I was not the same
And could not say how. Then a long time I stood
there
Pondering the way of it in my heart, and how
The coming of it was a blessing
(pp.36-37).

The moment of inspiration is "tragically partial" and "unrepeatable," and the experience of it must, as the poem must, mitigate and mediate, to borrow Vogelsang's expression. We hear echoes of Eliot's Four Quartets, and within both poems John's words also echo: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The persona, Mary, like Merwin, is drawn to the past and must repeatedly urge herself to "live forward" and to "grow forward." She feels that she cannot:

And I moved away because you must live
Forward, which is away from whatever
It was that you had, though you think when you have
it
That it will stay with you forever. Like that word
I thought I had known and held surely and that it
Was with me always. In the evening
Between the shadows the light lifts and slides
Out and out, and the cold that was under the air
Is the darkness you remember, and how it was
There all the time and you had forgotten.
It carries its own fragrance. And there is this man
Will take me as a woman, and he is a good man,
And I will learn what I am, and the new names. Only

> If I could remember, if I could only remember
> The way that word was, and the sound of it. Because
> There is that in me still that draws all that I am
> Backwards, as weeds are drawn down when the water
> Flows away; and if I could only shape
> And hear again that word and the way of it--
> But you must grow forward, and I know
> That I cannot. And yet it is there in me:
> As though if I could only remember
> The word, if I could make it with my breath
> It would be with me forever as it was
> Then in the beginning, when it was
> The end and the beginning, and the way
> They were one; and time and the things of falling
> Would not fall into emptiness but into
> The light, and the word tell the way of their falling
> Into the light forever, if I could remember
> And make the word with my breath
> (pp.38-39).

Mary's ambivalence--her attachment to the past and her uncertainty about the future--is analogous to that of the poet, who continually rejects his own accomplishments. We recall, in "East Coker" (II,19) Eliot's indictment of his own poetics: "a periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion." Then, in "The Dry Salvages" (III,14,26,39,45), he repeatedly urges fellow voyagers, as Mary urges herself, to "fare forward." But the most significant resonance between "The Prodigal Son," "The Annunciation," and Eliot's Four Quartets is with part of the famous conclusion to "Little Gidding" (V,1-12), in which Eliot affirms a new poetics;[34] it, too, echoes the parable of the Prodigal Son and the opening words of the Johannine gospel. It is too well known to repeat it here.

The final poem in Part Two of Green With Beasts is "Birds Waking." Unlike Merwin's earlier poetry, it has a topical setting. At daybreak, in Surrey, England, the poet contemplates the kinship of birds--analogically that of poets--and the unity of their song: "Somethimes one would break from the cloud but from the song never" (p.71). Merwin is still vitally concerned with his "Voice," but now other necessities begin to inhabit his poetry:

> I thought I had never known the wind
> Of joy to be so shrill, so unanswerable,
> With such clouds of winged song at its disposal, and I thought
> Oh Voice that my demand is the newest name for,
> There are many ways we may end, and one we must,
> Whether burning, or the utter cold descending in darkness,
> Explosion of our own devising, collision of planets, all
> Violent, however silent they at last may seem;
> Oh let it be by this violence, then, let it be now,
> Now when in their sleep, unhearing, unknowing,
> Most faces must be closest to innocence,
> When the light moves unhesitating to fill the sky with clearness
> And no dissent could be heard above the din of its welcome,
> Let the great globe well up and dissolve like its last birds,
> With the bursting roar and uprush of song!
> (pp.72-73).

The words "great globe," "bursting roar," and "uprush," describe not only a tumultous song but, ironically, a thermonuclear detonation. In such an eventuality, in theory at least, we would see a "great globe," hear a "bursting roar," then, as the surrounding oxygen was sucked into the funnel of the blast, we would see the "uprush" of the rising column.

"Birds Waking" is the last of the land poems in Green With Beasts. It is a serene poem within which the image of a thermonuclear explosion seems as noxious as the reality it foresees. But such things need to be given a voice, and clearly Merwin has chosen to "break from the cloud" and to hone a satiric edge to his "Voice."

The third and final part of Green With Beasts is comprised of a series of sea poems which extends into Merwin's next volume. These poems are units in a comprehensive structure which continues to delineate Merwin's odyssey. In these poems he contemplates, and then embarks upon, an archetypal sea that will take him back to the present, to America, and, finally, to the creation of the family poems at the end of his next volume.

In the first sea poem, "Evening With Lee Shore and Cliffs," the poet has not yet cast off and remains sheltered, on the lee-side, by the shore. The setting confirms not only his attachment to the past but his reluctance, yet, to "fare forward":

> Sea-shimmer, faint haze, and far out a bird
> Dipping for flies or fish. Then, when over
> That wide silk suddenly the shadow
> Spread skating, who turned with a shiver
> High in the rocks? And knew, then only, the waves'
> Layering patience: how they would follow after,
> After, dogged as sleep, to his inland
> Dreams, oh beyond the one lamb that cried
> In the olives, past the pines' derision. And heard
> Behind him not the sea's gaiety but its laughter
> (p.75).

The diction, metrics and biblical echoes may tempt readers to compare this poem with Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover." But, whereas Hopkins' bird cuts and slides in dazzling flight, Merwin's "shadow" glides on more ominous wings.

"Sea-shimmer, faint haze, and far out a bird/ Dipping for flies or fish": here, initially, the pictorialism, reminiscent of the post-Symbolists,[35] instills a momentary calm.

But it is as ephemeral as the vision itself, which Merwin dissipates with a single adverb, "then." A wash of sibilants follows, as the "shadow" sweeps over the water and leaves the "waves' layering patience," and an overlapping of cumulative phrases and end-stopped vocables. We experience this poem at a sensory level of awareness; its rhythms convey as much as its words. There is a movement within the language itself that reflects poetic history; we can sense, initially, not only the pictorialism of the post-Symbolists, but the sonority of Merwin's own early work, which he quickly effaces. And we experience, also, his anxiety as "evening" descends and envelops him and the sheltering "lee shore."

In "Fog" the poet-mariner casts off: "You see," he says, "shore-hugging is neither surety/ Nor earns salt pride braving the long sea-sweeps" (p.79). Setting out again on another cycle of his odyssey, he heads for open water. The diction and the syntax confirms that Odysseus is the archetype:

> Well, the needle swings still to north, and we know
> Even in this blindness which way deep water lies.
> Ships were not shaped for haven but if we were
> There will be time for it yet. Let us turn head,
> Out oars, and pull for the open. Make we
> For mid-sea, where the winds are and stars too.
> There will be wrung weathers, sea-shakings, calms,
> Weariness, the giant water that rolls over our
> fathers,
> And hungers hard to endure. But whether we float
> long
> Or founder soon, we cannot be saved here
> (pp.79-80).

Merwin's attachment to the European literary tradition can be said, but only in a general sense, to lessen with this poem, after which his return to America and to the modern world is given figurative expression.

The final poem in Green With Beasts is, suitably "A Mariners' Carol" (pp.84-85). Its refrain and its repeated address and request, "wind of our faring" and "O star shine before us," seek guidance for the journey. Traditionally, a refrain is viewed as an aesthetic device, though, according to R. P. Blackmur and Albert B. Lord, although not in reference to Merwin's poetry, it has a greater significance. Blackmur maintains that it is "the emphatic measure of all those gestures that have to do with the declaration of recurrence, return, rebirth and new birth, of motion in stillness and stillness in motion, of permanence in change, and change in permanence."[36] Lord, in his discussion of oral epic, says of the refrain that we would be "safe in assuming that the repetition was there in two forms originally, not for the sake of meter, nor for the sake of convenience in building a line, but rather for the sake of redoubled prayer in its hope of surer fulfillment." And the real meaning of such devices, he tells us, is rooted in the oral world where "the poet was sorcerer and seer before he became 'artist.'"[37] Such views deepen an appreciation of Merwin's poem, and allow us to hear the refrain not as a lyric convention but as a prayer for guidance through uncharted waters.

The first twelve poems in The Drunk in the Furnace (1960) are also sea poems. "Odysseus" is the first"

Always the setting forth was the same,

Same sea, same dangers waiting for him
As though he had got nowhere but older.
Behind him on the receding shore
The identical reproaches, and somewhere
Out before him, the unravelling patience
He was wedded to. There were the islands
Each with its woman and twining welcome
To be navigated, and one to call "home."
The knowledge of all that he betrayed
Grew till it was the same whether he stayed
Or went. Therefore he went. And what wonder
If sometimes he could not remember
Which was the one who wished on his departure
Perils that he could never sail through,
And which, improbable, remote, and true,
Was the one he kept sailing home to? (p.1).[38]

A series of sea poems chronicles Merwin's passage from the old world to the new, from Europe to America. He is the Odysseus of this poem. Many years had passed since he had left his homeland and had set out to become a poet. His quest led him through many countries where he had, he says in a "Sestina" for Robert Graves (A Mask for Janus, p.49), "Under many masters studied one song." He had navigated foreign islands and had eluded the siren forms, the "twining welcome," that could have ensnared him. And now, in this poem, he is returning home, not knowing what to expect.

Cheri Colby Davis describes a very different mariner, one "who experiences all the vacuity and futility encountered by modern man." He cannot "cope with anything but the immediate present," she says, and "because of his lack of a real destination, Odysseus becomes a veritable symbol of alienated modern man." She insists that "rather than focusing on Odysseus's energy, prowess and deeds, as Homer and Tennyson did, Merwin focuses on his rootlessness and the absence of strong human ties in his life." Davis's reading results, I think, from too literal an identification of the title, and, as a consequence, not only is Penelope brought into the poem (as the personification of the "unravelling patience" that Odysseus "was wedded to"), but also Ithaca and, worst of all, a mindless Odysseus. He is so lost, she says, that he cannot "take a moral reading of his own course or . . . remember his wife whom he has not seen in twenty years." Davis's view might have been considered credible--though I would not have considered it so because it rests on the specific equation of Merwin's Odysseus with that of Homer, rather than on the premise that both accounts show evidence of mythopoetic thought rather than reasoned discourse. Regardless, she destroys her own argument when she deftly dismisses the poem; "the triply rhymed ending," she concludes, "is weak, vague and inconclusive."[39] If this were true of the ending, it would surely give support to her argument that Odysseus is mindless. For what better ending could there be for a poem about a mindless Odysseus than one which is "weak, vague and inconclusive"?

Obviously, had Merwin wished, he could just as easily have rhymed the entire poem. He did not because it would not have served his purpose. As it is, the triply-rhymed ending is strong, clear and conclusive. Rhyme is not only an aesthetic adjunct of form; it may also have meaning. In "Odysseus" the rhymed words occur, significantly, only in the second half of the poem, where they form a confluence--an emotive analogue of the poet-mariner's psychological state. Rhymed words, even disparate rhymed words, cohere; they are drawn together. So, too, is the poet, aware of "the dangers waiting for him," drawn forward. How much more effectively could the desire to continue a quest into the unknown be conveyed? Davis's interpretation of this poem, and what I consider to be her unjust criticism of it, results from her not seeing it as a unit in a comprehensive structure. Reflexive reference, as I hope I have shown, not only enriches the experience of the poem itself but, also, that of the total experience of Merwin's poetry.

Merwin's odyssey is seen to progress through a series of sea poems, and each confirms the persistence of his search for means of poetic articulation. The way, like that of Odysseus himself, is uncharted. In the second poem, "Iceberg," the poet says:

> And recall how many
> Mariners, watching the sun set, have seen
> These peaks on the horizon and made sail
> Through the darkness for islands that no map
> Had promised, floating blessèd in
> The west. These must dissolve
> Before they can again grow apple trees (p.2).

At the end of this poem, we notice that an obstrusive, internal rhyme ("blessed"/"west") is muted. The juxtaposition of the illusory Hesperides with commonplace, not golden, apple trees provides a paradigm for the development of Merwin's poetics: the fabulous metaphors of traditional mythology are slowly being replaced by those of Merwin's own devising. The level of diction in The Drunk in the Furnace approximates that of everyday speech. It is "common" and, at appropriate times, completely candid. To a sailor ashore, for instance, the sea is the "bare-faced original/ Bitch-sea" (p.7), and a "Bell Buoy" at the entrance to a harbor is "crusted/ . . . with gull-crap" (p.13). Such expletives, had they appeared in Merwin's earlier work, would have been so out of place as to appear distasteful. But in this volume they almost escape notice.

The final poem in this opening series of sea poems is called "The Bones," and confirms the poet-mariner's arrival on the shore. Beside a beached wreck, with "Timbers like the ribs of a man or the jaw-bone/ Of some extinct beast," he muses on on instruments that have served in the production of sound:

> It takes a long time to hear what the sands
> Seem to be saying, with the wind nudging them,
> And then you cannot put it in words nor tell
> Why these things should have a voice. All kinds
> Of objects come in over the tide-wastes
> In the course of a year, with a throaty
> Rattle: weeds, driftwood, the bodies of birds
> And of fish, shells. For years I had hardly
> Considered shells as bones, maybe
> Because of the sound they could still make, though
> I knew a man once who could raise a kind
> Of wailing tune out of a flute he had,
> Made from a fibula: it was much the same
> Register as the shells'; the tune did not
> Go on when his breath stopped, though you thought
> it would (p.14).

Then, noticing a man seated by the wreck who is eating and littering the beach with more "bones," he ponders the meaning of sentient life, and of his own existence: "Then/ I saw how the sand was shifting like water,/ That once could walk.

Shells were to shut out the sea,/ The bones of birds were built for floating/ On air and water, and those of fish were devised/ For their feeding depths, while a man's bones were framed/ For what?" (pp.14-15). The question has a general relevance, but the answer is a personal one, and that of a poet:

> For knowing the sands are here,
> And coming to hear them a long time; for giving
> Shapes to the sprawled sea, weight to its winds,
> And wrecks to plead for its sands. These things
> are not
> Limitless: we know there is somewhere
> An end to them, though every way you look
> They extend farther than a man can see (p.15).

Many of the poems in this volume continue to delineate Merwin's odyssey. His faith in the common word is resolute. In "Choice of Prides" (cf. ON prythi "valor," "ornament"), he speaks lightly of his attire, and it is obvious that he is referring not to his clothing but to the dress of his poetics. These are two stanzas from the poem:

> But from a choice of prides I would pick
> (Or so I hope) the bare cheek
> To amble out, innocent of arms
> And alone, under the cocked guns
> Or what missiles might be in season,
> And this in the pure brass of the act
> Attired, and in no other armor.
>
> Considering that, of every species
> (I should reason) mine is most naked,
> For all its draperies enacting
> As a pink beast its honest nature,
> I will take in this raw condition
> What pride I can, not have my boast
> In glad-rags, my bravery plated (p.30).

"Some Winter Sparrows," a poem comprised of a dozen unrhymed quatrains, is also an analogical creation. The sparrow, the commonest of birds, is Merwin's metaphor for the poem:

> On a bitter day I juggle feathers,
> My hands hatch, I am better
> Answered than puppet masters,
> With small winds at my fingers (p.26).

Such poems, Merwin acknowledges, are not always successful. Some "shriek like nails on a slate," some are found "too late," and are "worse/ Than ice inside" his "closed hand" (p.27), and others will simply "not come down" (p.28). In Merwin's poetry, the undomesticated bird is generally allied with the poem, particularly in contrast to the domesticated bird, which indicates a failure.

The dozen quatrains of "Some Winter Sparrows" are as plain and as familiar as their metaphorical counterpart and exemplify the "new, strange kind of simplicity" which James Dickey saw emerging in this volume.[40] But the "astonishment" of The Drunk in the Furnace, as Richard Howard points out with his customary locution, "is its last dozen poems," which have "an ungainliness and an intimacy one would have thought inaccessible not only to the singer of all those carols and cansos, but even to the connoisseur of numinous landscapes and emblematic weathers."[41]

In these final poems, the mundane grimy world of industrialized Pennsylvania looms real in colloquial diction, replete with bars and butt-ends, poolhalls and smoldering coal mines, drunks, and decay--all a reflection of a contemporary landscape, and a portent of what is to follow in Merwin's next volume. It is not that the desolation and inextinguishable mine-fire, the poisoned creek, the grimy buildings, and human decay are new and arresting, but that they are old and familiar, and contain, like the smoldering mine, evidence of a moral disaffection which is at the center of the industrial complex. The spirit of a nobler past, a vibrancy that human weaknesses do not lessen, is found in the family portrait poems. But that spirit, as we discover in "Grandmother Dying," succumbs. Only the "dirty river" flows on:

> And when she heaved up
> Her last breath, to shake it like a fist,
> As out of a habit so old as to be
> Nearly absent, at the dirty river
> Sliding away there the same as ever,
> Bid says you could not hear her because there
> Came a black engine that had been waiting
> Up the tracks there for ninety-four years, and
> Snatched it out from her lips, and roared off
> With it hooting downriver, making the tracks
> Straighten out in front of it like a whip,
> While the windows rattled loud to break, the things
> On the shelves shook, the folds of her face jarred
> And shivered; and when it was gone, for a long
> Time the goosed laundry still leaped and jiggled
> In the smutty wind outside, and her chair went on
> Rocking all by itself with nothing alive
> Inside it to explain it, nothing, nothing (p.44).

All of the other poems at the end of The Drunk in the Furnace show that Merwin is examining his familial heritage. And, as I pointed out in Chapter One, it is obvious that he feels a greater kinship with those relatives who chose, in spite of a role that was often dictated to them, to go their own way: "John Otto" (p.39) who, at age ninety-six, suddenly left the home in which he had lived for eighty years and walked away over a mountain; or the unpredictable "Uncle Hess" who would recognize his own family "only on certain days when the air was right."(p.40); and Merwin's own grandfather who, though he raised a family, always "got away down the green river" (p.41).

In the final and title poem of the book, a riotous Dionysian figure asserts the presence of unbridled life, and that amid physical and moral squalor:

> For a good decade
> The furnace stood in the naked gully, fireless
> And vacant as any hat. Then when it was
> No more to them than a hulking black fossil
> To erode unnoticed with the rest of the junk-hill
> By the poisonous creek, and rapidly to be added
> To their ignorance.
>
> They were afterwards astonished
> To confirm, one morning, a twist of smoke like a pale
> Resurrection, staggering out of its chewed hole,
> And to remark then other tokens that someone,
> Cosily bolted behind the eye-holed iron
> Door of the drafty burner, had there established
> His bad castle.
>
> Where he gets his spirits
> It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical:
> Hammer-and-anvilling with poker and bottle
> To his jugged bellowings, till the last groaning clang
> As he collapses onto the rioting
> Springs of a litter of car-seats ranged on the grates,
> To sleep like an iron pig.
>
> In their tar-paper church
> On a text about stoke-holes that are sated never
> Their Reverend lingers. They nod and hate trespassers.
> When the furnace wakes, though, all afternoon
> Their witless offspring flock like piped rats to its siren
> Crescendo, and agape on the crumbling ridge
> Stand in a row and learn (p.54).

The drunk is a provocative and enigmatic figure, though I am inclined to believe that he represents another metamorphosis of the poet. His presence is an affirmation of joy amid squalor, and infers a "pale resurrection" of Dionysian worship and the celebration of recurrent life. Children are drawn to him, and they can "learn" from him. He is a manifestation of a pagan spirit, of divine intoxication which, if it has any sacred outlet in the modern world, exists in the arts. "The Dionysian element," Carl Jung says, writing of medieval Christianity, "has to do with emotions and affects which have found no suitable religious outlets in the predominantly Apollonian cult and ethos of Christianity."[42] The drunk, in the furnace, like the followers of Dionysus, celebrates in a place that is beyond the limits of the city and the confines of sanctified structures. There, like Flaubert's poet, he beats out his tunes; the dual meaning of "spirits" implies that his intoxication is more than physical: "Where he gets his spirits/ It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical."

In apposition to his celebration, a joyless ritual is being enacted in a "tar-paper church." Its commercial construction taints its religious purpose. And, the sermon within affirms not life but an eternal hell: "In their tar-paper church/ On a text about stoke-holes that are sated never/ Their Reverend lingers." We must wait out two prepositional phrases and an inverted negative, which finally deposits its emphasis on "never," before we are given the subject and the anticipated verb "linger." It is this verb, of course, that defines the performance of the sentence. It may even be inferred from the passage that the "Reverend" is titillating the carnal fantasies of his dour parishioners.

The drunk's behavior is affirmed. In juxtaposition to a lingering negation, he is a welcome intrusion into a bleak, industrialized landscape. This same grimy landscape formed the environs of Merwin's youth--what he had sailed away from and came back to find. It affords a limited perspective. But in his next volume, The Moving Target, this perspective is broadened to encompass America.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

[1] Greek and Roman, in Herbert Gray, George Foot, and John Arnott MacCulloch, eds., The Mythology of All Races, 13 vols. (Boston, 1916-32; rpt. New York: Cooper Square, 1964), I, 297-98. The etymology of the name Janus is that suggested by Michael Grant, Roman Myths (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p.149. See also W. Warde Fowler, The Religious Experience of the Roman People: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus (London: Macmillan & Co., 1911), pp.76-77, 125-27.

[2] Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 209-11, lines 14, 26, 39, 45.

[3] All subsequent references to A Mask for Janus (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, and London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford Univ. Press, 1952) are by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[4] Anabasis: A Poem by St.-John Perse, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), p. 10.

[5] "Preface by Hugo von Hofmannsthal," ibid., trans. James Stern (1949), pp.105,106. Orig. published in German: "Introduction to St.-J. Perse's Anabasis," Neue Schweizer Rundschau (May, 1929).

[6] The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal, Studies in Language and Literature, ed. Haskell M. Block (New York: Random House, 1967), p.191.

[7] Eliot, p.11.

[8] "Preface by Hugo von Hofmannsthal," p.105.

[9] "Matthew Arnold," The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp.118-19.

[10] Walter J. Ong, S. J., *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion Book, 1970), p.57.

[11] See "Cynghanedd," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger et al, enlarged ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974).

[12] *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, amended and enlarged ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p.18.

[13] For a comprehensive view of ancient Greek mnemonics, see Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1963).

[14] In William J. Martz, ed., *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p.269.

[15] Rev. of *A Mask for Janus* by W. S. Merwin, *Furioso*, (Spring 1953), p.58.

[16] Italicized in Merwin's epigraph; Wheelwright's name is incorrectly given as "Wheelock" in the text.

[17] My translation of "la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêle où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles," from *Madame Bovary*, ed. with Introduction and Notes by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1971), Part 2, Chap. 12, p.196.

[18] *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p.22; ellipsis in original.

[19] All subsequent references to *The Dancing Bears* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954) are by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[20] *Alone With America: Essays on The Art of Poetry in The United States Since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p.363.

[21] All subsequent references to Green With Beasts (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956) are by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[22] "'Tireless Quest': A Conversation with W. S. Merwin," ed. Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, English Record, 19 (February 1969), 10 and n.1.

[23] "A Portrait of W.S. Merwin," Shenandoah, 21, No.2 (Winter 1970), p.13.

[24] "The Poetry of W. S. Merwin," Twentieth Century Literature, 16 (1970), p.280; his emphasis.

[25] Collected Poems 1909-1962, p.39.

[26] The Greek Myths, 2 vols., rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960), I, 184 (52.6).

[27] Ibid., p.203.

[28] "Tradition and The Individual Talent" (1919), Selected Essays, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p.5.

[29] "W. S. Merwin and The Nothing That Is," Contemporary Literature, 16, No.1 (Winter 1975), p.25.

[30] "Toward the Great Language: W. S. Merwin," Modern Poetry Studies, 3, No.3 (1972), p.102.

[31] Ibid., p.103.

[32] In The Distinctive Voice, ed. Martz, p.269.

[33] "On Open Form," in Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p.271.

[34] Collected Poems 1909-1962, pp.198, 210-11, and 221, respectively.

[35] For a discussion of the relation of painting to Symons and the other English Symbolists, see Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 179-86.

[36] Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), p.21.

[37] The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p.66.

[38] All subsequent references to The Drunk in the Furnace (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960) are by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[39] "Merwin's Odysseus," Concerning Poetry 8, No.1 (Spring 1975), pp.25-26.

[40] Babel to Byzantium: Poets & Poetry Now (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), p.143.

[41] Alone with America, p.368.

[42] "Individual Dream Symbolism in Relation to Alchemy," Dreams, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1974), p.217. Jung's essay is translated from Psychologie und Alchemie, 2nd ed. (Zurich, 1952).

CHAPTER THREE - TO NAME THE WRONG: 'THE MOVING TARGET'

Merwin comments upon his return to America in the first poem of The Moving Target (1963), which reaffirms the archetype of the post-mariner: "I have brought myself back like many another crusty/ Unbarbered vessel launched with a bottle" (p.2).[1] The poem is called "Home for Thanksgiving," but it has nothing to do with the annual American holiday. It is Merwin's personal celebration of a new beginning for his poetry:

> I bring myself back from the streets that open like long
> Silent laughs, and the others
> Spilled into the way of rivers breaking up, littered with words,
> Crossed by cats and that sort of thing,
> From the knowing wires and the aimed windows,
> Well this is nice, on the third floor, in back of the bill-board
> Which says Now Improved and I know what they mean,
> I thread my way in and I sew myself in like money.
>
> Well this is nice with my shoes moored by the bed
> And the lights around the bill-board ticking on and off like a beacon,
> I have brought myself back like many another crusty
> Unbarbered vessel launched with a bottle,
> From the bare regions of pure hope where
> For a great part of the year it scarcely sets at all,
> And from the night skies regularly filled with old movies of my fingers,
> Weightless as shadows, groping in the sluices,
> And from the visions of veins like arteries, and
> From the months of plying
> Between can and can, vacant as a pint in the morning,
> While my sex grew into the only tree, a joyless evergreen,
> And the winds played hell with it at night, coming as they did

Over at least one thousand miles of emptiness,
Thumping as though there were nothing but doors,
insisting
"Come out," and of course I would have frozen.

Sunday, a fine day, with my ears wiped and my collar
buttoned
I went for a jaunt all the way out and back on
A street car and under my hat with the dent settled
In the right place I was thinking maybe--a thought
Which I have noticed many times like a bold rat--
I should have stayed making some of those good women
Happy, for a while at least, Vera with
The eau-de-cologne and the small fat dog named Joy,
Gladys with her earrings, cooking and watery arms,
the one
With the limp and the fancy sheets, some of them
Are still there I suppose, oh no,

I bring myself back avoiding in silence
Like a ship in a bottle
I bring my bottle.
Or there was thin Pearl with the invisible hair nets,
the wind would not
Have been right for them, they would have had
Their times, rugs, troubles,
They would have wanted curtains, cleanings, answers,
they would have
Produced families their own and our own, hen friends
and
Other considerations, my fingers sifting
The dark would have turned up other
Poverties, I bring myself
Back like a mother cat transferring her only kitten,
Telling myself secrets through my moustache,
They would have wanted to drink ship, sea, and all or
To break the bottle, well this is nice,
Oh misery, misery, misery,
You fit me from head to foot like a good grade suit
of longies
Which I have worn for years and never want to take
off.
I did the right thing after all (pp.2-3).

The images in the poem are conspicuously commonplace: the blinking neon sign, the street car, the cosmetic women, the vacant pint, and the familiar "can," or toilet. The diction and colloquial phraseology are equally familiar. Together, these elements confirm that Merwin has brought his poetry back to his homeland and to the present, "like a mother cat transferring her only kitten." Behind him lies Europe, the past, and a poetic tradition that includes not only his own work, "old movies of my fingers," but such representative texts of modern poetry as Eliot's Prufrock and Other Observations, which itself, Hugh Kenner says, marked a new beginning, "a new beginning for post-Symbolism in English."[2]

There are numerous echoes in "Home for Thanksgiving" that remind us of Eliot's famous poem. The title Prufrock and Other Observations is rhythmically parodied by the phrase, "hen friends and other considerations." There is also a satirically genteel refrain, "well this is nice," a presence of women, a qualifying ambivalence, a hint of sexual license in the double entendre "I should have stayed making some of those good women/ Happy," and, of course, an image in silent streets, of Eliot's famous cat:

> I bring myself back from the streets that open like long
> Silent laughs, and the others
> Spilled into the way of rivers breaking up, littered with words,
> Crossed by cats and that sort of thing (p.2).

Eliot's poem is not being parodied as an object of satire, but echoed as a representative mode or style of poetry--a style from which Merwin's poetry has departed. He was, he feared, threatened by domestication:

> They would have wanted curtains, cleanings, answers, they would have
> Produced families their own and our own, hen friends and
> Other considerations (p.3).

Eliot's influence on modern poetry was enormous. It "produced families" whose sons, like the prodigal Merwin, had to take their inheritance and leave. And it is this specific inheritance that Merwin has left behind: "my fingers sifting/ The dark would have turned up other/ Poverties." He is not isolating himself from the tradition, but rejecting the codification of style, "more or less predicatably recurring pattern[s]," which tends to produce schools or "families"; poetry, Merwin feels, is a personal and "undomesticated phenomenon."[3] The third poem in this volume, "Lemuel's Blessing," makes this clear.

This poem is the most direct and personal statement that Merwin has yet made in his poetry about his vocation. It confirms that he conceives of poetry as essentially oral, and believes that it gives us, to borrow expression from one of his essays, "an indelible awareness of its parentage with that Biblical waif, ill at ease in time, the spirit."[4]

Unfortunately, "Lemuel's Blessing," which, A. Poulin, Jr. suggests, is "probably the most powerful prayer-poem of the century,"[5] has received little attention. Paul Carroll discusses it at length, in his book The Poem in its Skin, but he concludes that "it remains an enigma." The poem had a profound effect on Carroll, and his initial response to it was not unlike my own:

> Ever since "Lemuel's Blessing" appeared in the early winter of 1962 in The New Yorker, the lonely grandeur of the voice praying and the authority of individual lines and images in it have brought me back again and again to the poem. Yet it remains an enigma. (In a

> seminar in the Writers Workshop at The University of Iowa I studied "Lemuel's Blessing" with some of the most able and knowledgeable readers of poetry a teacher could want: but we had to admit, after some hard work, that we'd failed to arrive at any stable understanding of the poem. This essay has gone through five or six false starts so far; and as I look at "Lemuel's Blessing" on my desk, it seems more mysterious than ever.) What I find puzzling about this poem is simple yet obscure and even disturbing. There seems to be no question that it is a prayer; yet how does the reader come to some understanding of the enigma which the poem invites him to contemplate: To whom does Lemuel pray? And for what?[6]

In Merwin criticism, it is refreshing to find such candor; but, at the same time, it is disappointing to learn that so many people are baffled by "Lemuel's Blessing." There seems to be only one explanation for this, and that is the literal-mindedness of the critics. This is not uncommon in Merwin criticism. Carroll's literal-mindedness spurred him to ask the wrong questions, questions predicated on the literal assumption that Lemuel, and not the poet, is praying.

The epigraph to the poem, from which the title is derived, serves not to identify the speaker but to ground the poem in an essentially oral mode of poetry, and to pay homage to Christopher Smart, who was also interested in the oral aspects of poetry. Though misled, Carroll came extremely close to arriving at a similar conclusion and, in a way, my own interpretation of "Lemuel's Blessing" owes something to him. But first, the poem:

> Let Lemuel bless with the wolf, which is a
> dog without a master, but the Lord hears his
> cries and feeds him in the desert.
> CHRISTOPHER SMART: Jubilate Agno

You that know the way
Spirit,
I bless your ears which are like cypruses on a mountain
With their roots in wisdom. Let me approach.
I bless your paws and their twenty nails which tell their own prayer
And are like dice in command of their own combinations.
Let me not be lost.
I bless your eyes for which I know no comparison.
Run with me like the horizon, for without you
I am nothing but a dog lost and hungry,
Ill-natured, untrustworthy, useless.

My bones together bless you like an orchestra of flutes.
Divert the weapons of the settlements and lead their dogs a dance.
Where a dog is shameless and wears servility
In his tail like a banner,
Let me wear the opprobrium of possessed and possessors
As a thick tail properly used
To warm my worst and my best parts. My tail and my laugh bless you.
Lead me past the error at the fork of hesitation.
Deliver me

From the ruth of the lair, which clings to me in the morning,
Painful when I move, like a trap;
Even debris has its favorite positions but they are not yours;

From the ruth of kindness, with its licked hands;
I have sniffed baited fingers and followed
Toward necessities which were not my own: it would make me
An habitué of back steps, faithful custodian of fat sheep;

From the ruth of prepared comforts, with its
Habitual dishes sporting my name and its collars and leashes of vanity;

From the ruth of approval, with its nets, kennels, and taxidermists;

It would use my guts for its own rackets and intruments, to play its own games and music;
Teach me to recognize its platforms, which are constructed like scaffolds;

From the ruth of known paths, which would use my
feet, tail, and ears as curios,
My head as a nest for tame ants,
My fate as a warning.

I have hidden at wrong times for wrong reasons.
I have been brought to bay. More than once.
Another time, if I need it,
Create a little wind like a cold finger between my
shoulders, then
Let my nails pour out a torrent of aces like grain
from a threshing machine;
Let fatigue, weather, habitation, the old bones,
finally,

Be nothing to me,
Let all lights but yours be nothing to me.
Let the memory of tongues not unnerve me so that I
stumble or quake.

But lead me at times beside the still waters;
There when I crouch to drink let me catch a glimpse
of your image
Before it is obscured with my own.

Preserve my eyes, which are irreplaceable.
Preserve my heart, veins, bones,
Against the slow death building in them like hornets
until the place is entirely theirs.
Preserve my tongue and I will bless you again and
again.

Let my ignorance and my failings
Remain far behind me like tracks made in a wet season,
At the end of which I have vanished,
So that those who track me for their own twisted ends
May be rewarded only with ignorance and failings.
But let me leave my cry stretched out behind me like
a road
On which I have followed you.
And sustain me for my time in the desert
On what is essential to me (pp.6-8).

The stylistic affinity between this poem and Smart's Jubilate Agno invites a comparison. At one time, Smart's poem was considered to be so alien to poetic expression as to be "evidence of his "madness." Smart was misunderstood, and horribly maligned:

> In the first place, Jubilate Agno represents an attempt to adapt to English verse some of the principles of Hebrew verse as expounded by Bishop Robert Lowth in his pioneering study, De sacra poesi Hebraeorum, first published in 1753. Putting its theological content to one side, Lowth examined the Bible as a work of literature, and devoted a good deal of discussion to the rules governing its poetry . . . .
>
> A distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry much emphasized by Lowth is its antiphonal or responsive character. Much of it was designed to be spoken or chanted by two groups; as Lowth has it, "One of the choirs sung a single verse to the other, while the other constantly added a verse in some respect correspondent to the former." In addition, to numerous examples of Biblical poetry so written, he cites passages in the Bible directly referring to the practice, such as I Samuel 18.7 and Isaiah 6.3.
>
> These principles form the basis for Smart's experiment.[7]

Like Smart, Merwin appreciates the poetry in the Bible: "to recur in its purest forms (whether they are strict, as in Waller's 'Go, Lovely Rose,' or apparently untrammeled, as in The Book of Isaiah in The King James Version) poetry seems to have to keep reverting to its naked condition, where it touches on all that is unrealized."[8]

Interestingly, Carroll mentions Lowth in his essay, but not in connection with Smart; he "notices," he says, "a minor stylistic parallel between some of Merwin's lines and what the 18th century English exegete Robert Lowth first observed about many of the lines or parts of lines in the Psalms."[9] This is an astute observation and should not have been relegated to a footnote. But, perhaps Carroll was unfamiliar with Jubilate Agno, or perhaps he did not know that Smart knew Lowth and was influenced by his work.

The biblical allusion to Lemuel in the title informs Merwin's poem but it is not crucial to it. The reference to the "wolf," however, is important. It puzzled Carroll, so he wrote to Merwin seeking clarification. In a reply, dated November 16, 1967, which is partially quoted in Carroll's essay, Merwin says: "these animals are not chosen and refuse to be identified, absolutely, zoologically. They rise, as it were, from dreams facing away, and no more want that kind of partial identification than the Other wishes to divulge a name." Carroll thinks that Merwin's comment is "fascinating and cryptic."[10] It is, and it is also poignant. The wolf, particularly in contrast to its domesticated kin the dog, is a noble and independent creature. It refuses "to be identified." Merwin, too, has resisted similar efforts to have his poetry categorized. He has denied affiliation with any particular group or school and, as we know, he views poetry itself as an "undomesticated phenomenon." "No one has any claims on it," he says, "no one deserves it, no one knows where it goes. It is not pain, and it is not the subconscious, though it can hail from either as though it were at home there."[11] Poetry, Merwin's own poetry, is the subject of "Lemuel's Blessing."

What Carroll failed to realize was that Merwin was urging him not to make "partial" identifications, such as that which literal meaning often accords. But, he continues to do so. He assumes, for instance, that it is the Biblical Lemuel, and not the poet, who is praying:

> Lemuel prays to a spirit to whom he attributes both knowledge of the "way" he wants to follow and power to help him avoid various snares impeding the journey, as well as the resources to sustain Lemuel once he's followed the way into the "desert." What seems mysterious, however, is that this spirit has long ears and paws: indeed, it is a wolf.

These assumptions create problems, and lead Carroll and his careful exegesis into the area of paradox, when none really exist:

> In fact, "Lemuel's Blessing" ends with an enigma even more puzzling that the intricate one with which it began. The paradox is this: although Lemuel becomes more like a wolf as the prayer develops (in the sense that allusions to the derogatory image of himself as "nothing but a dog lost and hungry" gradually vanish altogether) he still lacks the wolf's most characteristic and important quality--namely, austere independence. On the contrary, Lemuel ends by making one more dependent plea: "And sustain me for my time in the desert/ On what is essential to me."[12]

It is not the Biblical Lemuel who is speaking, but the poet. And he is not making "one more dependent plea"; he is praying. His awareness that the "ruth" (from AS hrēow, "sorrow," especially for one's own faults) is not only a place of refuge for an animal but, also, the resting place of a corpse, belies the assertion that he lacks "austere independence": "Let me wear the opprobrium of possessed and possessors/ As a thick tail properly used/ To warm my worst and my best parts." In the past, the poet says, he had "sniffed baited fingers and followed/ Toward necessities which were not . . . his own," necessities that would have made him "An habitué of back steps."

The poet's independence is never really in question;

without it there would not have been such a poem. However, his continued independence cannot be guaranteed, anymore than that of the wolf, which, in many parts of the world, is already extinct. Therefore he prays for what is essential to him, for the integrity of his art and for deliverance from artistic domesticity: "from the ruth of kindness with its licked hands"; "from habitual dishes"; "from collars and leashes"; "from the ruth of approval"; and "from the ruth of known paths."

"Lemuel's Blessing" is a complicated poem. Its antiphonal "From" and "Let" sections echo the antiphonal "Let" and "For" sections of Smart's Jubilate Agno and establish affinities with modes of the oral world. It is liturgical, public, and essentially oral poetry, which, in the tradition of the Psalmists, contributes to a growing awareness of our oral heritage. It preserves the heritage by recreating it.

Another change in Merwin's poetry is anticipated in the opening poems of The Moving Target. "Home for Thanksgiving" renounces an established linear style, "littered with words,/ Crossed by cats and that sort of thing," which Merwin infers would have led to a domestication of his art, while "Lemuel's Blessing" delineates the same theme but shows a more obvious affinity with modes of the oral world: poetry in its "naked condition." But this change, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is not as abrupt as some critics and the demarcation of books imply. In a general sense, Merwin's poetry has been constantly changing.

In 1962, more than a year before the publication of The Moving Target, Merwin published an essay on the poetry of Agostinho Neto, the Angolan poet who was unjustly imprisoned several times for voicing his opposition to the dictatorship of Salazar. In his essay, Merwin speaks of Neto's courage and of the moral responsibilities of the poet:

> It is possible for a poet to assume his gift of articulation as a responsibility not only to the fates but to his neighbors, and to feel himself obligated to try to speak for those who are in circumstances resembling his own, but who are less capable of bearing witness to them. There are many kinds of dangers involved in any such view of what he owes himself and his voice. There is, for instance, the danger that his gift itself, necessarily one of the genuinely private and integral things he lives for, may be deformed into a mere loud-speaker, losing the singularity which made it irreplaceable, the candor which made it unteachable and unpredictable. Most poets whom I have in mind would have considered this the prime danger. But the other risks have all claimed their victims. Where injustice prevails (and where does it not?) a poet endowed with the form of conscience I am speaking about has no choice but to name the wrong as truthfully as he can, and to try to indicate the claims of justice in terms of the victims he lives among. The better he does these things the more he may have to pay for doing them. He may lose his financial security, if he has any. Or his health, his comfort, the presence of those he loves, his liberty. Or his life, of course. Worst, he may lose, in the process, the faith which led him to the decision, and then have to suffer for the decision just the same.
>
> Put at its simplest, and with its implications laid out all plain and neat, the decision to speak as clearly and truthfully and fully as possible for the other human beings a poet finds himself among is a challenge to obscurantism, silence and extinction. And the author of such a decision, I imagine, accepts the inevitability of failure as he accepts the inevitability of death. He finds a sufficient triumph in the decision itself, in its deliberate defiance, in the effort which it makes possible, the risks it

> impels him to run, and in any clarity which it helps him to create out of the murk and chaos of experience. In the long run his testimony will be partial at best. But its limits will have been those of his condition itself, rooted, as that is, in death; he will have recognized the enemy. He will not have been another priest of ornaments. He will have been contending against that which restricted his use and his virtue.[13]

Merwin's decision "to speak as clearly and truthfully and fully as possible" had been developing in his poetry for many years. In the succession of his books, The Moving Target most clearly exemplifies a change, but, as with a living organism, change is fundamental to growth, and is constant.

We can recognize progressive changes in Merwin's poetry--not just in what he says but the way in which he says it. A classification of his metaphors will indicate, as I will show in the next chapter, a drift toward pre-scientific or primitive modes of awareness, for which the child is often the archetype. And this is not a matter of style, of literary aesthetics, but a reflection of the development of Merwin's personal belief, as he searches not merely for modes of expression but for tenets of faith, integers of meaning. Perhaps this was always so; the unifying theme of an odyssey seems to indicate that it was. But not until The Moving Target do we really feel that we have met the man, not the poet, the man seeking meaning--himself the microcosm.

Merwin's odyssey appears to end in The Moving Target, but it does not. He continues to explore. The visual images of his journey, such as the embarkment, the circumambient voyage, the real islands where he rested, the imaginary ones toward which he had set sail again, and his arrival home, all seem to disappear at the beginning of this volume. But his odyssey turns again to the past, to the preliterate world.

In contrast to Merwin's earlier books, there are fewer words in *The Moving Target* and more blank space surrounding them. The poems themselves seem liminal, seem on the threshold of something new. Merwin is still dissatisfied with himself and with his poetry. In "Acclimatization," he says: "They gave me/ Their praise [from L *pretium*, "price"] and left me *mute*" (emphasis mine). He blames himself: "It was my fault, I/ Got hungry, they fed me. I gave them/ My solemn word in payment. And all/ The bells in the city rang in triumph/ Like cash registers" (p.15). He must again move forward. "I've no excuse," he says in "The Nails," "to be stuck here turning/ Like a mirror on a string" (p.18). I am reminded of the image of the poet in "Prufrock," who is presumably transfixed among other dead specimens: "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin."[14] But Merwin is uncertain of the way ahead, and he seeks guidance. In "Sire," we hear repeated personal invocations for guidance:

> Here comes
> The white-haired thistle seed stumbling past through the branches
> Like a paper lantern carried by a blindman.
> I believe it is the lost wisdom of my grandfather
> Whose ways were his own and who died before I could ask.
>
> Forerunner, I would like to say, silent pilot,
> Little dry death, future,
> Your indirections are as strange to me

As my own. I know so little that anything
You might tell me would be a revelation (p.20).

The image of the thistle reappears in "Invocation," where it embodies the tension of dread and desire, sterility and potential fecundity, that has always plagued poets:

The day hanging by its feet with a hole
In its voice
And the light running into the sand

Here I am once again with my dry mouth
At the fountain of thistles
Preparing to sing (p.40).

The absence of a main verb in the first line and of sequential markers is conspicuous, and more representative of a spoken idiom than a written style. The relationship between the two stanzas is analogical rather than logical; they are like strophes in balanced synthesis. The compound image in the first stanza is that of an hourglass, which suggests not only the press of time, but also the ephemerality of sound. In the second stanza, this image is reversed and becomes that of a fountain. Ironically, the song that issues is from a "dry mouth"; literally a consequence of nervousness, it is an emblem of the printed, as opposed to the spoken, poem.

These contraries, which are the figurative extremes of a single essence, crystallize in "Finally." As the title infers, there is a resolution, a moment, in which the poet again acknowledges the mystery of inspiration:

My dread, my ignorance, my
Self, it is time. Your imminence
Prowls the palms of my hands like sweat.
Do not now, if I rise to welcome you,
Make off like roads into the deep night.

The dogs are dead at last, the locks toothless,
The habits out of reach.
I will not be false to you tonight.

Come, no longer unthinkable. Let us share
Understanding like a family name. Bring
Integrity as a gift, something
Which I had lost, which you found on the way.
I will lay it beside us, the old knife,
While we reach our conclusions.

Come. As a man who hears a sound at the gate
Opens the window and puts out the light
The better to see out into the dark,
Look, I put it out (p.22).

Merwin prays for "integrity" (from L tangere, "touch"), for something untouched and whole which, he says, he "had lost." The familiar metaphors of his notation are easily shared and, together, confirm the poem's literary significance: the domesticated "dogs" are "dead," the confining "locks" are "toothless," and the repetitious "habits" are "out of reach." It is a simple, sensuous poem, in which the poet pledges fidelity to his muse. We can "share understanding," he promises, "like a family name." Though he is praying, poetry is a communion and we partake of it. We share language "like a family name," and Merwin is using it with complete fidelity, with concision and candor.

The poems in The Moving Target are noticeably shorter than are those in his earlier books. Single words, set in syntactic relief, radiate meanings. Abstractions, nourished by their ancient roots, blossom again. The title-word "Separation," a three-part cognate, is reanimated in a brilliant three-line poem:

> Your absence has gone through me
> Like thread through a needle.
> Everything I do is stitched with its color (p.9).

In these shorter poems, grammatical or sequential logic, which is indicative of a written style, is frequently abandoned. The ear relies far less on sequential logic than does the eye, which has been conditioned by print to seek connectives. The need for sequentiality is particularly evident in long passages of prose or poetry, in which the absence of connectives would cause confusion. In contrast with the written style, the spoken style requires no such markers. And in these poems, striking visual images punctuate the rhythms and diction of the spoken idiom. In this volume, Merwin still retains some conventions of the written style, such as capitalizing the initial letter of each line and utilizing some punctuation, but he abandons many of these conventions in his next volume, and almost all of them in The Lice.

Ironically, Merwin's use of striking visual images is itself indicative not of a visual mode but of an oral one. Among the formulaic elements of preliterate epic, visual images not only aided in perpetuating the tradition, but were themselves prototypes of the abstractions that evolved along with literacy.[15] Quite often, Merwin renders a difficult and polysemous concept through visual imagery. This not only aids in our understanding, but tends to remain in our memory: "My words are the garment of what I shall never be/ Like the tucked sleeve of a one-armed boy" ("When You Go Away," The Lice, p.62).

Many of Merwin's shorter poems, in which all inessential elements have been pared, seem riddling or hermetic and remind us of the kinship between the riddle and the metaphor. Aristotle remarks in his Rhetoric: "clever riddles do, in general, furnish one with happy metaphors; for metaphor is a kind of an enigma." And, of course, in his judgment, "the greatest thing by far [in poetry] is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others: and it is also a sign of genius."[16]

Too frequently, the critics of Merwin's poetry have forgotten this. Several critics have characterized The Moving Target, loosely and obscurely, as surrealistic. Alan Williamson even attributes the beginnings of American Surrealism to this volume, and to Wright's The Branch Will Not Break.[17] Elements in Merwin's poetry which might be interpreted as evidence of poetic surrealism are, most often, his metaphors. For instance, shoes, clocks, gloves, knives, flags, calendars--simple everyday items--assert a seemingly irrational independence, but they are metaphors for a divisiveness that Merwin finds abhorrent. Multiple forms of divisiveness, even those within language, as we shall see later, are satirized by Merwin.

In "An End in Spring," which is not in this volume but in The Lice (p.7), Merwin observes: "The compatriots stupid as their tables/ Go on eating their packages/ Selling gloves to the clocks/ Doing alright." The word "compatriots," the present participle of the verb "to sell," and the empty idiomatic phrase, "doing alright," establish a contemporary American context. And the metaphors of "tables" as consummables or tabulations, "packages" as processed food, "clocks" as spatial analogues of time's passage, and "gloves" as barriers to tactile experience, all satirize man's divisiveness.

Two more examples, one from The Moving Target and another from The Lice, will demonstrate not only Merwin's succinct notation but, also, the progressive oral and public quality of his style as he continues to draw upon the common stock of the idiom and the rhythms of contemporary speech. Both examples involve a verbomotor cliché (which signifies both the verbal element and the accompanying activity). This particular cliché is probably known throughout the western world and is a common part of childhood experience:

> And I pray for them in the old way:
> May the tracks be laid over them
> And their fingers be picked off like daisy petals:
> "She loathes me, she loathes me not"
>
> ("Route With No Number," p.26, emphasis mine).

And:

> Just the same it's a life it's plenty
>
> The stairs the petals she loves me
> Every time
> Nothing has changed
>
> ("I Live Up Here," The Lice, p.8, emphasis mine).

These examples are stylistically similar. But the second one is more direct, and less reportorial. The line "The stairs the petals she loves me" has no punctuation other than its rhythm. It involves the reader and what Eliot terms the "auditory imagination." By comparison the first example seems contrived. Even the punctuation nullifies the experience of the poem. The grammatical conventions confront us, and not the experience that the words seek to restore. And it is this effect which, since the publication of The Drunk in the Furnace, Merwin was attempting to avoid and which, with rare exceptions, he has avoided:

> I wanted something that was more direct and in which the experience, the thing that was trying to make the poem (which was a private experience), would have a relationship with the language that was completely different. In other words, the poem would be something which considered the language as existing apart from itself. It would be something in which the experience was really trying to get into the words and come right through them if it could.[18]

Merwin's reflection upon his art and upon language is even more evident in The Moving Target than in his preceding books. In "Reunion," for instance, he reflects somewhat ironically, upon his vocation:

At the foot of your dry well,
Old friend in ambush,
What did we expect?

Have we really changed?
You could never forgive me for
Pleasures divulged or defeats kept secret.

You have flowered in your little heat
Like an untrimmed wick.
It is plain what you are thinking

While I am thinking
How you have grown into your ugliness
Which at one time did not fit you.

Console your distaste for departures:
I find I brought only the one.
Hand me my coat.

Friend Reductio,
Would you have known delight
If it had knocked you down? (p.58).

"Have we really changed?" Merwin inquires of his art. The adverb guards against a hasty response and anticipates further explanation. The diction in the poem is commonplace, and the images are those of our immediate sensory experience. The "untrimmed wick," with its flickering yellow light, casts dancing shadows which can produce beautiful effects. But the light that is cast by it is not as bright nor as pure as that which is cast by a trimmed wick. And the "untrimmed wick" of language had, in Merwin's judgment, "flowered." The word suggests that beautiful and final phase in Nature that heralds death and confirms new life. Another "departure" became necessary for Merwin. But it is not so much a departure as a "reunion" with an "old friend." Merwin has chosen not to be "another priest of ornaments," and has evinced a plainer style which is itself an affirmation not only of his faith in the common word but in the common man. It is a "challenge to obscurantism."

Merwin's syntax suggests this, but his concise diction repeatedly affirms it. There are no unnecessary words and no obscure terms or esoteric allusions--nothing that would require some specialized knowledge. The poems are startlingly simple. Their language is what Merwin would later refer to, though not in reference to his own poetry, as the "original idiom." It is "not a particular mode of poetry," he says, "but the great language itself, the vernacular of the imagination, that at one time was common to men."[19] Emerson makes a similar observation about language in "The Poet":

> The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.

Emerson also reminds us: "We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem."[20] Similarly, Merwin believes that the "absolute poem would be only one word."[21]

Merwin's odyssey has led him beyond geographic and temporal boundaries to the beginnings of language. In "To Where We Are," a poem that is thematically related to those in The Moving Target that I have already discussed, he can state with impunity, "I come back to where I have never been," and can then rejoice in the "Simplicities":

> With open arms the water runs in to the wheel.
>
> I come back to where I have never been.
> You arrive to join me.
> We have the date in our hands.
>
> We come on to where we are, laughing to think
> Of the Simplicities in their shapeless hats
> With a door so they can sit outside it (p.61).

The "wheel" and the "water" flowing through it are a configuration that Pound would term a "radiant node or cluster."[22] The poem is the "wheel," a particular configuration that is the words, but the words are not it. Merwin's first use of this metaphor, though more tentatively, was in two poems from The Dancing Bears, "Tower" (pp.9-12) and "On the Subject of Poetry" (p.61). Here, the "Simplicities in their shapeless hats" are the words; they are simple and unpretentious. The "door," another of Merwin's familiar metaphors, defines a created opening that is a poem. In the second half of "To Where We Are," we are addressed as "neighbors," "natives," and "creatures of/ One song" and man's greatest artifact, language. "Listen," we are requested in the one-word, final line:

> I hope I may say
> Our neighbors
>
> Natives of now, creatures of
> One song
> Their first, their last,
>
> Listen (p.61).

Merwin makes repeated avowals of silence and impermanence in his recent poetry. In The Moving Target alone we find: "oh small/ Deaf disappearance in the dusk, in which of their shoes/ Will I find myself tomorrow?" (p.21); "To the city of wires I have brought home a handful/ Of water" (p.77); "We can say it with silence our native tongue" (p.79); "With all my words my silence being one" (p.90).

The voice of the poet belies a silence that is nonetheless real in an age in which "wires" and print facilitate and mute human communication. Consequently, in "The Man Who Writes Ants," Merwin conceives of his printed words as "walking/ In single file," like ants, one letter, one word, one line at a time: "I am walking in silence I am walking in silence I am walking/ In single file listening for a trumpet" (p.83). These are not examples of the cutting edge of surrealism nor expressions of Merwin's "disbelief in discursive revelation,"[23] as Alan Williamson assumes, but notations of a simple truth. Silence is sound's "polar opposite" and an integer of meaning: "sound and silence define each other. Words must be interspersed with pauses, silences, to be understood. Indeed, the deepest understanding, especially as between persons, comes often in the silence that follows an utterance, as the effects of the words reverberate without sound in the auditor's (and the speaker's) mind. For sound itself is defective in accomplishing its own aims. Silence makes up for what sound lacks."[24] Sound breaks the silence of "our native tongue" and is drawn back into it almost immediately: "With my hands nothing oh with death my words/ With my words nothing/ One at a time" (pp.74-75). Words can be locked securely in the printer's form, but their meanings are not as easily confined. As we have seen, the "door" in "To Where We Are," and also an "open doorway" that "speaks" in "Daybreak," define a created opening and a rejuvenation of language that is a poem. In the patrimony of ancient parables such tropes were a commonplace: "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (Jn. 10.9).

The analogy of the poet's voice with a "handful/ Of water" (p.7), of which the printed product is conceived of as the residuum (commonly salt) is an apt one. It allows Merwin to protest an alienation that is a consequence of print while affirming the efficacy of poetry. This is apparent in "The Singer," Merwin's metaphorical address to the rain and to his own art:

> The song dripping from the eaves,
> I know that throat
>
> With no tongue,
> Ignoring sun and moon,
>
> That glance, that creature
> Returning to its heart
>
> By whose light the streams
> Find each other.
>
> Untameable,
> Incorruptible,
>
> In its own country
> It has a gate to guard.
>
> There arrived without choice
> Take up water
>
> And lay it on your eyes saying
> Hail clarity
>
> From now on nothing
> Will appear the same
>
> And pass through
> Leaving your salt behind (p.47).

"Daybreak" is the final poem in The Moving Target, and it refers to all of the preceding poems in this volume:

> Again this procession of the speechless
> Bringing me their words
> The future woke me with its silence
> I join the procession
> An open doorway
> Speaks for me
> Again (p.97).

In the poem, the absence of any punctuation anticipates the poems of The Lice. The title "Daybreak," confirms yet another new beginning, and the "open doorway" anticipates yet another departure.

The Moving Target confirms Merwin's intention, expressed in his essay on Neto, and even before that in his poem "Choice of Prides" (p.30), from The Drunk in the Furnace, to speak candidly on behalf of his fellow man. But hardly any critical comment has been made about the satire in The Moving Target, satire occasioned by a period of American history which, in the 1960's, demanded it. An undeclared and progressively unpopular war continued to be waged in Vietnam. And the rights of many individuals who protested against the war, as is now common knowledge, were violated. Many poems in The Moving Target register Merwin's protest. The flag, for instance, is "the same rag" under which "enough have been buried," and yet it still has its "followers, mad for a bit of color./ Damn them" (p.52). It is "faded white" (p.52). And "rust," conspicuous as one of the few uses of color in this volume, is described as "a little pile of western color" (p.56). Justice is seen to be in the service of silence and death: "Your jaws tied with a ribbon marked Justice/ To help us (p.91), and the hallowed Bible has been "hollowed for swearing on" (p.94, emphasis mine). The "months are shot at midnight by/ A cop in civies in a dark car on a side street," (p.72) and "Scarlet is the road of the animals" (p.91). "Lies are elected" (p.94), and "invisible presidents the same motion in them all" (p.76) gamble gratuitously with the environment. And Merwin laments: "I begin to know where I am/ I am home" (pp.76-77). At home, in America, even birth is characterized as a blind, or materially blighted, entry into the kingdom of the dead: "You born with the faces of presidents on your eyelids" (p.93). Many recent American coins bear the image of a president, although this line also refers to the ancient practice of placing coins on the eyelids of corpses--in Greek mythology, the fare for passage across the styx. Death itself, in America, is apotheosized: "Those who believe/ In death have their worship cut out for them" (p.56).

Merwin's testimony of moral corruption is a long and unhappy one, and one for which this catalogue of disjunct phrases cannot stand proxy. But one short poem, "An Island in the Harbor," will convey the tone and some of the substance of the satire in this volume:

> My own country my countrymen the exchanges
> Yes this is the place
>
> The flag of the blank wall the birds of money
>
> Prisoners in the watch towers
> And the motto
> The hopes of others our Guardians
>
> Even here
> Spring passes looking for the cradles
>
> The beating on the bars of the cages
> Is caught and parcelled out to the bells
>
> It is twelve the prisoners' own hour
>
> The mouse bones in the plaster
> Prepare for the resurrection (p.87).

The island in the harbor is Alcatraz, originally Isla de Alcatraces, a natural bird sanctuary named after the pelicans which were once its most conspicuous inhabitants. The history of the island is a long and miserable one. Wrested from the native Indians of Northern California, it has been, since the late eighteenth century, a fortress, a U.S. Army disciplinary barracks, a military prison and since 1934, a federal prison which was closed just a few months before the publication of this volume in 1963. Now, mostly sparrows gather there.

"My own country my countrymen the exchanges/ Yes this is the place": two lines built out of public voices, fragments that found their way onto bumper stickers. Protestors of the draft system and the Vietnamese war were awakening the ire of the "silent majority," who hastened to respond from the rear bumper of their car: "This is my country"; a decal flag was added to confirm the property right. Black Americans were still being lynched in the South, but "freedom riders" were gathering in protest. The "exchanges" were heard like gunfire, and the dialogue became heated: "Love it or leave it," "Change it or lose it." Alarmed liberals began to deplore "the rhetoric of violence," as though silencing the exchanges would somehow quell the racial and social discord. Comedians rolled their eyes and wobbled their head in sick caricature of the black man, insisting "dis mus' be d' place," an enigmatic phrase which, inexplicably, became current. America became even more militaristic.

Violence was prepared for, instead of being prevented. For the first time in history, a significant number of Americans began to leave their homeland. Those who remained, and who had the courage to speak out publicly, became themselves moving targets.

Certainly, few American readers of "An Island in the Harbor" would experience the patriotic verve that once imbued the words "My own country my countrymen." Most of them would experience only a feeling of despair which obviously occasioned Merwin's satire. The word "country," (from L contra) means "over, against, on the opposite side" and, in this poem, implies the jingoism that Merwin satirizes. He associates the flag, for instance, not with patriotism but with materialism: "The flag of the blank wall the birds of money." Political, social, and economic fetters will, for many people who remember the turbulent 60's, confirm the efficacy of the "prison" metaphor:

> Prisoners in the watch towers
> And the motto
>   The hopes of others our
>   Guardians

An usual transposition of order occurs within the poem. Prisoners man the watch towers. And the "hopes of others," not necessarily shared hopes, are "our/ Guardians." We cannot be sure whether "our/ Guardians" protect or guard. The transposition of order and the ambiguity implies that Americans are prisoners, despite the implicit sanctuary of the "harbor," whose island may also remind us of Liberty Island, in New York harbor, on which the famous statue stands.

However, the second half of this poem affirms a redeeming belief in the natural order: "Even here/ Spring passes looking for the cradles." But the "cages" and the succession of "hours" announce further divisiveness and the coming of a darkness, in which only rodent bones "prepare for the resurrection."

The pervasive satire in The Moving Target is never destructive. It is, as it should be, a positive and regenerative force. "My friends," Merwin says, in a poem of the same title, "without shields walk on the target":

It is late the windows are breaking

My friends without shoes leave
What they love
Grief moves among them as a fire among
Its bells
My friends without clocks turn
On the dial they turn
They part

My friends with names like gloves set out
Bare handed as they have lived
And nobody knows them
It is they that lay the wreaths at the milestones
it is their
Cups that are found at the wells
And are then chained up

My friends without feet sit by the wall
Nodding to the lame orchestra
Brotherhood it says on the decorations
My friend without eyes sits in the rain smiling
With a nest of salt in his hand

My friends without fathers or houses hear
Doors opening in the darkness
Whose halls announce
Behold the smoke has come home

My friends and I have in common
The present a wax bell in a wax belfry

> This message telling of
> Metals this
> Hunger for the sake of hunger this owl in the heart
> And these hands one
> For asking one for applause
>
> My friends with nothing leave it behind
> In a box
> My friends without keys go out from the jails it is night
> They take the same road they miss
> Each other they invent the same banner in the dark
> They ask their way only of sentries too proud to breathe
>
> At dawn the stars on their flag will vanish
>
> The water will turn up their footprints and the day will rise
>
> Like a monument to my
> Friends the forgotten (pp.80-81).

Evidence of man's divisiveness is encapsulated in metaphor: targets, shoes, gloves, clocks, kinship and ownership, keys, jails, and flags. The poem both satirizes and affirms, defining the evil by what is not. The poet's friends, though walking "on the target," lay "wreaths" at the "milestones" commemorating a loss even of distance. They "set out/ Bare handed as they have lived," and leave "cups" at the "wells" so that other travellers may drink. Their "flag" is not the starspangled "banner," but the boundless night sky.

The Moving Target is an important book. It epitomizes the departure that Merwin gradually made from an established and critically acclaimed style. Each of his successive books may be regarded, in a very general sense, as further refinements of the style in this volume. But, more importantly, The Moving Target is a unique chronicle of recent American history, and a testimony of Merwin's resolve "to speak as clearly and truthfully and fully as possible for the other human beings" he "finds himself among."

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

[1] All subsequent references to The Moving Target (New York: Atheneum, 1963) are given by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[2] The Pound Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.132.

[3] "On Open Form" (1969), in Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p.271.

[4] "Notes for a Preface" (1966), in The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth Century American Poetry, ed. William J. Martz (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p.270.

[5] "Contemporary American Poetry: The Radical Tradition," Concerning Poetry, 3, No.2 (Spring 1970), 20.

[6] In The Poem in Its Skin (Chicago & New York: Follett Publishing Co., A Big Table Book, 1968), p.142.

[7] W. H. Bond, ed., Jubilate Agno, by Christopher Smart (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954), p.20.

[8] "On Open Form," p.271.

[9] The Poem in Its Skin, p.143n.

[10] Ibid., p.150n.; original emphasis.

[11] "Notes for a Preface," pp.269,270.

[12] The Poem in Its Skin, pp.142,149.

[13] "To Name The Wrong," The Nation, February 24, 1962, p.176.

[14] T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.15.

[15] Eric A. Havelock, Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1963), p.188.

[16] The Rhetoric of Aristotle, iii.2.1405^{b}, trans. with Notes by Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p.188; Poetics, 22.1459^{a}, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed., with an Introduction, by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p.1479.

[17] "Silence, Surrealism, and Allegory," Kayak, 40 (November 1975), 57-58.

[18] "'Tireless Quest': A Conversation with W. S. Merwin," ed. Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, The English Record, 19 (February 1969), p.11.

[19] "Notes for a Preface," pp.269-70.

[20] "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Journals, selected, with an Introduction, by Lewis Mumford (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1968), pp.256-57, 255.

[21] Quoted in Frank MacShane, "A Portrait of W. S. Merwin," Shenandoah, 21, No.2 (Winter 1970), p.13.

[22] Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.92.

[23] "Silence, Surrealism, and Allegory," p.58.

[24] Walter J. Ong, S.J., The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion Book, 1970), pp.187-88.

CHAPTER FOUR - CREATURES, SPIRITS: 'THE LICE'

Merwin's next collection of poems, The Lice, was published in 1967. Its poems resemble those in The Moving Target, particularly in their themes, but they are generally more sparse, more aphoristic. Space and silence surround utterances that are like monuments in a wasteland. "As all the reviewers of The Lice have declared," Jarold Ramsey notes, "its first premise is an intuition of apocalypse."[1] Disembodied voices and spectral forms inhabit polluted landscapes. What is not already dead appears to be doomed.

The Lice affords a bleak vision of contemporary existence but not one without hope. In one of his essays, "Notes for a Preface," Merwin says that "absolute despair has no art" and that "the writing of a poem, in whatever mode, still betrays the existence of hope, which is why poetry is more and more chary of the conscious mind, in our age."[2] Ramsey quotes this passage, and reasons: "if absolute despair has no art, then there must be degrees; partial despair over an often unthinkable and unspeakable age must find its poetic voice in regions of the mind somewhere below the orderly circles of discursive thought."[3] Ramsey is correct, inasmuch as Merwin is beginning in The Lice to explore preliterate modes of awareness. But he omits the next and concluding sentence of Merwin's essay, which confirms that the poet seeks the voice of "hope" and not the voice of "despair," either partial or absolute: "and what the poem manages to find hope for," Merwin points out, "may be part of what it keeps trying to say."[4]

There are really two themes that are implicit in Merwin's essay, "Notes for a Preface": the danger inherent in the impairment of man's senses, and the suicidal nature of ecological destruction. These are also major themes in Merwin's recent poetry, and they are often shown to be causally related. But the clearest expression of the relation of these themes, and one that does not require interpretation and extensive documentation from Merwin's poetry, is in "Notes for a Preface." Speaking of the poet, he says:

> Going along with the life of his time in an earnest fashion may or may not benefit the attempt to give utterance to the unutterable experience of being alive, and consciously mortal, and human, in any time. It does not necessarily entail going along with all possible activities of an emergent and epidemic species which scorns all life except its own withering existence, and is busy relegating the senses its predecessors were given to apprehend their world, and the creatures with which they were privileged to share it.

Modern man, Merwin claims, is "mutilated" and exists "in an age in which the person and his senses is being lost in the consumer, who does not know what he sees, hears, wants, or is afraid of, until the voice of the institution has told him." Merwin makes the distinction between actual "experience (which is personal and inseparable from the whole) and activity (which may well be communal and shared with machines)." And he suggests that modern man has "opted for activity,

activity, both as a means and, it would appear," he says, "as an end, though it meant abandoning something, and perhaps something essential of themselves."

Implicit in Merwin's view is the contention that modern man has become an unwitting accomplice in the destruction of his world, and of its sentient creatures. For if man's senses were "not _uniformed_, duped, and cowed," he concludes, "they would constitute a continuous judgment of the world they touched on" (emphasis mine).[5] Similarly, "all the uniforms know," he claims in one poem from _The Lice_, "what's no use."[6]

But man, as we see him in _The Lice_, appears to be bent upon destruction, and to be still marching to the famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic," or, more specifically, to an aberrant version of it which, though he does not identify it, Merwin says has "a rather rude part to it." Merwin's poem takes its title from the first line:

> When the war is over
> We will all be proud of course the air will be
> Good for breathing at last
> The water will have been improved the salmon
> And the silence of heaven will migrate more perfectly
> The dead will think the living are worth it we will
> know
>
> Who we are
> And we will all enlist again (p.64).

This is only one of the poems from _The Lice_, the form of which, or, more specifically, the rhythms of which, confirms the satire, and it does not represent the more positive, formal aspects of the book. These aspects have been largely overlooked; and The Lice has been viewed as a condemnation of man's divisiveness, and of his propensity to destroy not only himself but his planet and its creatures.

However, it is Merwin's intention in The Lice, and in his subsequent volume, The Carrier of Ladders, to delineate the themes of man's divisiveness, to seek to understand them, and, more importantly, to provide perhaps a counter to a mode of thought that he is beginning to feel is itself divisive. This cannot be explained in one or two pages, because it constitutes a gradual development of Merwin's thought which is revealed in his work in many ways, and extends over several years and, at least, two volumes of his poetry. Therefore, in this and the next chapter, I will develop the interrelated points that have led me to the general conclusion that The Lice and The Carrier of Ladders constitute an exploration of "primitive" ways of knowing, and that these are offered as a counter to what Merwin believes is the divisive tendency of modern man.

I will begin by showing the related significance of the titles, The Lice and The Carrier of Ladders--both of which show that Merwin is exploring preliterate modes of thought--and then by showing the prevalence in Merwin's recent poetry of the themes of modern man's divisiveness. Naturally, the poet represents modern man, and I will also show Merwin's suspicion that perhaps the nature of his own thought is itself divisive.

The titles of Merwin's collections are particularly relevant to the poems, and they provide the reader with a general orientation. The Lice is a title which, as indicated by an epigraph, is drawn from the preliterate Fragments of Heraclitus:

> All men are deceived by the appearances of things, even Homer himself, who was the wisest man in Greece; for he was deceived by boys catching lice: they said to him, "What we have caught and what we have killed we have left behind, but what has escaped us we bring with us."[7]

Four critics, L. Edwin Folsom, Jan B. Gordon, Carol Kyle, and Jarold Ramsey, have all commented on this epigraph. Folsom, whose view of The Lice will be given in the next chapter, does not mention the epigraph as such, but he alludes to what he supposes is its relevance with this observation about its poetry: "the self in these poems is infested with lice, with diseased things it cannot find and kill and so must carry with it."[8] This is an absurd comment, and I will have more to say later about the validity of Folsom's critical opinion. However, had Merwin wished to convey, through the poems in The Lice, such a simplistic and denigrating view of himself then the title, alone, might have aided in such an enterprise, but certainly not the accompanying epigraph from Heraclitus. But Folsom's idea does not warrant speculation.

The other three critics discuss the epigraph directly, and each has something significant to say about it. Gordon says: "the epigraph to the volume, although ostensibly about the neo-Hegelian problem of appearance and reality, is really about the relationship between temporal values and what we might call 'the hidden.'"[9] Gordon's essay seems unnecessarily complicated. He appears, with some justification, to be arguing that The Lice constitutes a dialectic on the nature of perception. And he makes some cogent observations about Merwin's poetry; but few of them are finally convincing because, as I pointed out in the first chapter, he cannot decide whether Merwin is an "innovator" or merely a "bricoleur" of words.

Kyle sees a relationship between Heraclitus' riddle and the style of The Lice. "The power and magic of the poetry," she says, "reside exactly in a Merlinesque quality of riddle or Anglo-Saxon charm that frames a question whose solution involves the tiny lice of language and existence that come with us."[10]

Ramsey's view of the significance of the epigraph comes closest to my own view. He says:

> Merwin has chosen one of the oldest and most widespread riddles known in the West (someone scrawled it on a wall in Pompeii, and versions have been recorded in Hungary, modern Greece, and Iceland)--and the poet's use of the version attributed to Heraclitus is especially revealing. The riddle's significance for the book (and it is absolutely central) can be read roughly as follows. Caught in the brute Heraclitean flowing but threatened with its mortal and indeed its apocalyptic stoppage, and unable to grasp the real continuity of his own self within it, the poet, one of Homer's kin, feels possessed by the ghostly presence of his human trouble with appearances. The "lice" he paradoxically brings along with him towards the end are the unresolved alternatives, the frustrated purposes, the guilt, missed chances, and unwritten poems of his discontinuous lives.[11]

Throughout his essay, Ramsey makes astute observations about The Lice, in which Merwin is certainly concerned with themes of mortality: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence" (p.50), and "Gray whale/ Now that we are sending you to The End/ that great god" (p.68). And he is particularly concerned with themes of his own mortality: "Sometimes it is inconceivable that I should be the age I am" (p.37); "Every year without knowing it I have passed the day/ When the last fires will wave to me . . . . Then I will no longer/ Find myself in life as in a strange garment" (p.58). Also, as almost every critic who has written about The Lice has noted, Merwin is deeply concerned over what he feels is an impending apocalypse, or, at least, a scientific threat to the quality of human existence: "On the door it says what to do to survive" (p.33).

As Ramsey has also pointed out, but without really assessing its relevance, the themes of man's mortality are not dealt with in a way that can generally be characterized as rational or discursive. Consider this stanza for instance, which is taken from the middle of "In Autumn" (p.41): "Moving on without memory/ Without having been near turning elsewhere climbing/ Nothing the wall." And Ramsey characterizes the style of The Lice succinctly. "The riddling imagination in Merwin," he says, "is rarely . . . playful or direct; but in his persistent abrupt personification of natural objects and forces, in his omission of logical connections and transitions (as well as punctuation), . . . in the way the poems metaphorically occupy, tease, short-circuit the workaday mind and liberate the preconceptual faculties, he really does seem to be practicing . . . a poetry of riddle."[12] In several respects, this could also be said of the style of Merwin's previous volume, The Moving Target, which, as I pointed out, figuratively renounces a linear literary style for that of an oral one. But the indications of this are far more pronounced in The Lice and in Merwin's subsequent volume.

To find a style and, equally importantly, a mode of thought, this is analogous to that of The Lice one can, directed by the epigraph, return to the preliterate and prerational expression of Heraclitus. In the Introduction to Philip Wheelwright's study of the Fragments, and particularly in the section "Expression and Presupposition," it is hard to find any descriptive passage of the style of the Fragments that does not also seem to be particularly applicable to that of The Lice. For instance, explaining the difficulties that a modern reader of the Fragments is likely to encounter, Wheelwright says: "In particular there are three modes of distinguishing, which seem quite natural to us today, but which are relied on to a far less degree in the thought and expression of Heraclitus: our grammatical distinction among parts of speech, our logical distinction between concrete and abstract, and our epistemological distinction between subject and object."[13] Wheelwright's assessment of the style of the Fragments could be applied to that of the majority of the poems in The Lice; but certainly not all, and certainly not exclusively. And, though more specific, Wheelwright's comments are similar to Ramsey's comments about The Lice, whose poems, he says, "metaphorically occupy, tease, short-circuit the workaday mind and liberate the preconceptual faculties."[14]

With minor reservations, I generally share Ramsey's view of The Lice. I do not believe that Merwin feels himself to be "caught in the brute Heraclitean flowing" but, rather, that he is beginning to affirm this principle and to extol the virtues of a mode of consciousness that propounds it. But this is not particularly clear in The Lice, which, like The Moving Target, appears to stress the themes of man's divisiveness. And, since Ramsey had not, at the time he completed his essay, considered the poems in Merwin's subsequent volume, The Carrier of Ladders, there is no reason why he should have reached a conclusion similar to my own. However, Merwin's belief that a metamorphic principle governs creation is dormant in The Lice, and is given figurative expression in the epigraph. This point is made progressively clearer in Merwin's subsequent poetry, and it will be obvious both in the theme and in the form of many of the poems that will be examined in this and the next chapter.

The Lice marks another point in Merwin's odyssey from which he turns again to the past to seek not simply viable means of poetic expression but alternate modes of awareness, other ways of knowing. For these can effect changes both in man's perception of his life-world and in his response to it:

so that the divisiveness that Merwin feels is characteristic of modern man is given a positive counter in the Heraclitean belief that "all flows." This is why the epigraph is certainly central to The Lice:

> All men are deceived by the appearances of things, even Homer himself, who was the wisest man in Greece; for he was deceived by boys catching lice: they said to him, "What we have caught and what we have killed we have left behind, but what has escaped us we bring with us" (emphasis mine).

The limitation of vision as a dominant mode of understanding is dramatized in the epigraph; but it is evident throughout The Lice. It is equally evident in The Moving Target which, like Merwin's critical pronouncements, tends to emphasize the oral aspects of poetry. So it comes as no surprise that Merwin provides, as a paradigm for his own poems in The Lice, the preliterate expression of Heraclitus. But, before I offer my interpretation of the epigraph, I will cite some of Walter J. Ong's ideas of the effect of media technologies on the human psyche. Although his ideas are theoretical, they appear to corroborate aspects of Merwin's poetry and to justify Merwin's concern for the necessary integration of man's senses. (Merwin is unfamiliar with Ong's theories, or at least he was when I spoke to him about them in 1978).

The way in which man views his world, Ong speculates, is governed by changes in the organization of his senses:

> In general, before the invention of script man is more oral-aural than afterward, not merely in that his words are all spoken and heard words, never visually perceived marks on a surface, but in that his whole response to actuality is thereby organized

> differently from that of typographic man. Writing, and most particularly the alphabet, shifts the balance of the senses away from the aural to the *visual*, favoring a new kind of personality structure, and alphabetic typography strenghthens this shift (emphasis mine).

Ong goes on to describe the visualist bent of the Western mind. There has been, he says, a "tendency of the past few centuries to overspatialize the universe so that everything is reduced to models picturable in space, and what is unpicturable ('unimaginable' is often the term invoked) is discarded as impossible or unreal." Visualism, he argues, and particularly "the shift of focus from the spoken word and habits of auditory synthesis to the alphabetized written word and visual synthesis . . . weakens the sense of presence in man's life-world, and in doing so tends to render this world profane, to make it an agglomeration of things."[15] This is not characteristic of preliterate cultures, Ong contends. And although such cultures differ greatly from one another, "it appears that at least a great many of them commonly conceive of actuality as united in some kind of harmony rather than in the visualist terms whereby cosmological unity is commonly pictured in modern technological society." Even present-day illiterate, or residually oral cultures, Ong reports, encourage "habits of 'auditory synthesis' as against habits of 'visual synthesis' enforced by modern science and grounded in literacy."[16]

The limitations of visual synthesis are dramatized in the epigraph to *The Lice*. What we have brought along with us, though it cannot be confirmed by visual synthesis, is a primitive consciousness--a part of what Jung terms the "collective unconscious," of which the child is the archetype.[17] And just as the microscopic lice have accompanied man for several million years, so too have the tiny lice of his language, and a mode of consciousness which, at one time, was not bound by the dictates of reason. "We must remember," Jung says, "that the rationalistic attitude of the West is not the only possible one and is not all-embracing, but is in many ways a prejudice and a bias that ought perhaps to be corrected."[18] It is Merwin's intention, beginning in The Lice to explore primitive modes of consciousness, or that which is also preliterate, prerational, and prescientific.

Many poems in The Lice explore facets of primitive consciousness, but two are particularly relevant, "The Child" (pp.37-38) and "The Widow" (pp.34-35). The first poem shows the impetus of Merwin's exploration, while the second has a broader cultural relevance. "The Child" begins, "Sometimes it is inconceivable that I should be the age I am/ Almost always it is at a dry point in the afternoon." Merwin's mortality presses him but he is stuck at a "dry point," which Roethke--who in his own poetry tried "to catch the movement of the mind itself"--says is "that particular hell of the poet."[19] Merwin appears to have lost faith, not simply in himself but in "knowledge as we know it." He attempts to fathom the depths of Western thought, as far back as its primal origins (cf. Gr. metropolis, "mother or parent city"), to find a connection, a familial "thread." The poem dramatizes a mental activity, a "search," or a cycle of Merwin's odyssey, of which we know nothing--neither its extent nor its duration--other than that it is antecedent to the poem:

> Then there are the stories and after a while I think something
> Else must connect them beside just this me
> I regard myself starting the search turning
> Corners in remembered metropoli
> I pass skins withering in gardens that I see now
> Are not familiar
> And I have lost even the thread I thought I had
>
> If I could be consistent even in destitution
> The world would be revealed
> While I can I try to repeat what I believe
> Creatures spirits not this posture
> I do not believe in knowledge as we know it
> But I forget.

It is important to note that the movement of the poem reveals the movement of the poet's mind and both are yet predominantly analytical, logical, and discursive. But there is a tentative assertion of primitive belief, in "creatures spirits," and an intuition of primitive ways of knowing. These hold promise for the poet and will become an integral part of his poetry--denominators of his style. "The Child" ends:

> This silence coming at intervals out of the shell of names
> It must be all one person really coming at
> Different hours for the same thing
> If I could learn the word for yes it could teach me questions
> I would see that it was itself every time and I would
> Remember to take it up like a hand
> And go with it this is at last
> Yourself
>
> The child that will lead you.

The "child" is the archetype of the primitive imagination and, in Biblical mythology, the archetype of innocence, whose vision foresees the end of division and the restoration of a paradise on earth: "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11.6).

It is "Not that heaven does not exist," Merwin claims in "The Widow" (pp.34-35), but that, at present, "it exists without us." Man's obtuseness, his visual prejudice, his insistence that only those "things that can be/ Represented" by "their dimension" seem "real," precludes any notions of sacrality. As the poem shows, man has relegated his senses, and has made of his life-world, to borrow Ong's phrase, "an agglomeration of things":

> There is no season
> That requires us
>
> Masters of forgetting
> Threading the eyeless rocks with
> A narrow light
>
> In which ciphers wake and evil
> Gets itself the face of the norm
> And contrives cities
>
> The widow rises under our fingernails
> In this sky we were born we are born
>
> And you weep wishing you were numbers
> You multiply you cannot be found
> You grieve
> Not that heaven does not exist but
> That it exists without us
>
> You confide
> In images in things that can be
> Represented which is their dimension you

Require them you say This
Is real and you do not fall down and moan

Not seeing the irony in the air
Everything that does not need you is real

The Widow does not
Hear you and your cry is numberless

This is the waking landscape
Dream after dream after dream walking away through it

Invisible invisible invisible.

"The Widow," that "rises under our fingernails," names the "quick" (from ME cwic, "life"), an area of extreme sensitivity that has come to designate a center of feeling. But, in the context of the poem, the metaphor does not allow that life or feeling exists as a complete entity, hence, "widow" (which stems ultimately from the Indo-European base widh-, "to be empty, be separated"). Similarly, a "cipher" is an arithmetic symbol of no inherent worth, or an instrument that measures only surfaces. Vision itself registers only surfaces, exterior forms. And in these forms, as the verb "confide" (cf. L fidere, "to trust") denotes, man places his faith:

You confide
In images in things that can be
Represented which is their dimension you
Require them you say This
Is real and you do not fall down and moan

Not seeing the irony in the air
Everything that does not need you is real.

The word "This" asserts attention as a pronoun, a substitute. It defines that which can be objectively verified, "things that can be represented." But such verification does not guarantee that we have established actuality, though we may have been conditioned to think otherwise. The word "moan" implies an alternate mode of awareness to that afforded by vision. Though its origins are obscure, it is likely that it came from the Anglo-Saxon word mǣnan, which means "to recite or tell." Similarly, the word "air" can mean simply "atmosphere" or the "outward appearance of a thing," or the "voice part of a melody." Given the context of the poem, the latter meaning is the most appealing--in other words, "not seeing the irony in" the poem--because it mitigates what would otherwise be merely a denunciation of visual synthesis. Instead, Merwin is urging man to integrate his sensory awareness, and not to trust the limited perspective of one mode of understanding to the exclusion of others.

There are many affinities between The Lice and the Fragments of Heraclitus that suggest a kindred thought. Both are ontological; both implicitly reject divisiveness; and both hold contraries in metaphoric suspension--not as contraries but as polarities of the same essence. In Merwin's "Looking East at Night," even death is not regarded as an end, but is viewed as the root of existence, a pale "harvest," and a shadowy reflection of life:

> Death
> White hand
> The moths fly at in the darkness
>
> I took you for the moon rising
>
> Whose light then
> Do you reflect
>
> As though it came out of the roots of things
> This harvest pallor in which

I have no shadow but myself (p.36).

The moon, which lends itself to the celebration of love, is here a metaphor of death. But the poem is not concerned merely with man's life cycle but with cyclical creation in general. The nocturnal passage of the moon, which furnishes a period of necessary dormancy in plant life, is as essential to natural processes as the diurnal passage of the sun; they are polarities of a single nutritive essence.

The ambience of Merwin's metaphors allows the subjective mind and the objective reality to meet, to coalesce, and then to renounce the illusory world of permanence. Nothing, Heraclitus attests, is more inconstant and more suspect than the outward form of things, which, to most preliterates, was of little consequence and no indication of their inward potency. Philip Wheelwright maintains, in his critical study Heraclitus, that the difficulties for a contemporary reader of the Fragments have resulted from the "postulates of Cartesian dualism."[20] And the same may be said about The Lice. "The lines move to no metric we can count and parse," Harvey Gross says. "We may name his tropes; but if we point out, in his poem 'Wish,' that uniforms are containers for things contained and Necessity is allegoria, we are merely bright boys understanding poetry."[21] Gross is right; and "Wish" is a good example of the poems in The Lice:

The star in my
Hand is falling

All the uniforms know what's no use

> May I bow to Necessity not
> To her hirelings (p.25).

The act of wishing is irrational, as is the practice of palmistry implied in the first two lines: "The star in my/ Hand is falling." The "star" is a sign in palmistry which is said to "announce inescapable events deriving from the place they occupy."[22] And despite the literary echoes in these lines, with Donne's "Song" for instance ("Go and catch a falling star") we cannot fail to hear the echoes of childhood: "wish upon a star," et cetera. These echoes are paramount and exemplify the animistic vision of the child--a mind untutored in the rationalistic or scientific view of the world. "But reason is only relative," Jung says, "and eventually checks itself in its own antinomies. It too is only a means to an end, a symbolical expression for a transitional stage in the path of development."[23]

At first glance, "Wish" appears to be, or appears to be in the form of, a syllogism--one of the means of proof in formal logic. But it is closer to the oral world, and to the form of an enthymeme, which is a rhetorical counterpart to the syllogism. It has an excluded middle--something that cannot be expressed as proof or thought of as concluding, because it is only a feeling, an intuition, rather than a rational thought.[24] As such, "Wish" could be said to parody syllogistic reasoning. I think that it does, intentionally.

The image of the "star" and that of the "uniforms" are antithetically balanced. No connectives join them. They are in separate and isolated lines, because they are not similar. So that not only the elements of the poem but the poem itself, its form, may be seen as metonomy. The "star" is an integral part of the natural order, while the "uniforms"--having only one form--represent the unnatural imposition of man's order.

At its simplest, "Wish" expresses Merwin's hope for his poetry: that that which must be, the capitalized "Necessity," will define the "form" of each poem, not the standardized uni-form. "Only the poem itself," he says in his essay "On Open Form," "can be seen as its form. In a peculiar sense if you criticize how it happens you criticize what it is."[25] And what "Wish" is, in another sense, is an integer of meaning that shows Merwin exploring modes of preliterate consciousness, and actually engaged in the process of changing his own thinking.

Meaning resides not simply in the words of the poem but in their ordering principle. And this principle, expressed in "Wish" but developing throughout The Lice, is like the Fragments of Heraclitus, preliterate. Isolated words, disjunct phrases, and radical juxtapositions in The Lice may suggest that Merwin's intention is "to dislocate . . . language into his meaning," to borrow Eliot's phrase,[26] but he is freeing language from the domestication of sequential logic and allowing each word to be again what Emerson calls a "brilliant picture."[27]

Language, Marshall McLuhan and Wilfred Watson say in

From Cliché to Archetype, is "man's greatest and most complex artifact, every word of which extends or involves all of his sensory life."[28] The poems in The Lice possess such complexity, despite their apparent simplicity. The poem "I Live Up Here," for instance, is deceptively simple, and built largely on the juxtaposition of clichés. There is one voice that orchestrates other voices, amid the shards of a contemporary waste land:

I live up here
And a little bit to the left
And I go down only

For the accidents and then
Never a moment too soon

Just the same it's a life it's plenty

The stairs the petals she loves me
Every time
Nothing has changed

Oh down there down there
Every time
The glass knights lie by their gloves of blood

In the pans of the scales the helmets
Brim over with water
It's perfectly fair

The pavements are dealt out the dice
Every moment arrive somewhere

You can hear the hearses getting lost in lungs
Their bells stalling
And then silence comes with the plate and I
Give what I can

Feeling It's worth it

For I see
What my votes the mice are accomplishing
And I know I'm free

This is how I live
Up here and simply

Others do otherwise
Maybe (pp.8-9).

The cliché, McLuhan and Watson point out, "is not necessarily verbal" and is "an active, structuring, probing feature of our awareness," capable of releasing emotions "from both the conscious and unconscious life."[29] The clichés in "I Live Up Here," each in their unique environment, release new meanings. Any of the cliché's purported staleness serves to counterpoint what is often a necessary irony. The juxtaposition of individual clichés within the poem, and the larger implicit juxtaposition of the private and the public sphere--the "up" and the "down"--affirm an endemic order as opposed to one of institutional design, such as we have seen in "Wish."

"Just the same it's a life it's plenty": life and plenty, in biblical mythology, are God's gift to Adamic man. Similarly, the verbomotor cliché in the first part of the poem, "The stairs the petals she loves me," stirs memories of childhood innocence and an animistic faith: she loves me, she loves me not, and so on. The speaker's faith is rewarded, and love persists: "Every time/ Nothing has changed."

In stark contrast, "Oh down there down there/ Every time" there is little evidence of real life. It is a frighteningly familiar, sterile landscape. We hear echoes of our own idioms grounded, as many of them are, in commerce. We see evidence of "accident," "decay," and the presence of an "emergent and epidemic species."[30] The quoted words are not from the poem but from Merwin's essay "Notes for a Preface"; both delineate the same theme.

In the poem, it is little wonder that one goes "down there" only "For the accidents and then/ Never a moment too soon." This could mean "just in time," but more probably means "much too soon," since the image in the sixth stanza, "In the pans of the scales the helmets/ Brim over with water," evokes the visual cliché of the symbol of justice, but confirms that it is a military justice that prevails, against which "votes," or the silent voice of the people, are impotent--the property of a timid proliferating species. Or, are the votes themselves verminous? Either way, "down there" an offering of silence seems the only viable response, since the possibility of a dialogue, theoretically present in a democracy, is clearly absent. Knights who once pledged their word on a gauntlet have, in the poem, evolved into even less substantive "glass knights" who "lie," and whose hands are gloved in "blood." The juxtaposition of these images suggests, further, that military justice will serve in the absolution of murder, and will even provide the water, that once served Pilate, to wash away the blood.

Ramsey considers this poem to be prophetic. It is, but not in the way that he supposes. "I Live Up Here," he says, strikes him "as a prophetic excoriation of the institutionalized Old Liberalism of Detached Good Intentions--such as would not be heard in this country for several years after the poem was written." He adds, that the speaker "condemns himself with his own complacent political apologia," and that he gives what he can because "he is so confident the democratic system is working for him at least."[31] Ramsey overlooks the orchestration of images. That, surely, is the speaker's, and it does not reflect complacency. Merwin has little interest in politics. In February of 1968, he said:

> For me, politics is the greatest bore in the world. But in our time I think it morally damaging to anyone to close his eyes to what's going on. I don't see how one can. While we're sitting here talking, people are being burned to death who probably never carried arms in their lives. This goes on around the clock. Others are starving to death. This isn't politics. This is simply something that, if one doesn't shut one's mind to it, one feels desperately helpless to do something about it. And that feeling of helplessness, that feeling of everything from anger to bewilderment, to bitterness, is a direct and inescapable part of one's daily experience at the moment. And one writes out of one's experience, that's all--and one acts out of it, too.[32]

The essence of Merwin's recent poetry involves the re-embodiment of verbal artifacts which, in turn, grant access to awareness--not as a definable absolute, but as a kaleidoscopic phenomenon, sometimes the manifestation of a single presence and sometimes that of a group or a culture. In "Bread at Midnight," for instance, a facet of contemporary consciousness is reflected in the dietary habits of what must be a large segment of the American populace:

> The judges have chains in their sleeves
> To get where they are they have
> Studied many flies
> They drag their voices up a long hill
> Announcing It is over
>
> Well now that it is over
> I remember my homeland and the mountains of chaff

> And hands hands deaf as starfish fetching
> The bread still frozen
> To the tables (p.18).

The poem is satiric. What are the judges saying? "It is over." Their sentence, the subject of which is another pronoun, betrays only cerebral activity. An etymologist would not find a "brilliant picture" underlying such parts of speech. The "bread" is literally frozen, and probably as nutritionally deficient as the packaged food in "An End in Spring." As a metaphor, "bread" has a universal significance; it could be termed a "vortex," "from which, and through which, and into which," Pound says, "ideas are constantly rushing."[33] Bread is the most basic of foods and, in a variety of forms, is consumed almost universally. Sanctified in the communion, it is a central metaphor in Christian mythology, and parables of wheat and "chaff" abound in the Judeo-Christian tradition: "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord" (Jer. 23.28). It is evident that the poem does not concern itself with dietary habits, but with moral sustenance: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt. 4.4; Lk. 4.4; Dt. 8.3). The poem makes it clear that the judicial responsibility of providing moral sustenance is lacking.

The first line of "Bread at Midnight," "The judges have chains in their sleeves," evokes the visual cliché of the judge's broad-sleeved robe, and the verbal cliché "he has something up his sleeve." The judges do: "chains." The "starfish," too, is a familiar image, particularly when it is out of its habitat, dead and dried. This image serves as a simile of the human hand, which is viewed as being as useless as "chaff." "Flies," while resonating audibly with "files," and to an extent visually, since both words are compounds of identical letters, suggest the stink of decay. And this is the condition that the poem describes and satirically defines.

The poems in The Lice are more pervasive in their satire of American institutions than are those in The Moving Target. At times, all of mankind appears to be indicted: "I am not ashamed of the wren's murders/ Nor the badger's dinners/ On which all worldly good depends/ If I were not human I would not be ashamed of anything" (p.71); "Before dark I would stop by the stream falling through black ice/ And once more celebrate our distance from men" (p.56); "Tonight once more/ I find a single prayer and it is not for men" (p.43); "Of all the beasts to man alone death brings justice" (p.50).

Within the context of these poems it is rarely mankind that is indicted, but man as a "compatriot," a "judge," a "cipher," a "politician," or a "president." I am reminded of Jonathan Swift's satire, and of his letter to Alexander Pope, written on September 29, 1725, which seems equally representative of Merwin:

> I have ever hated all Nations professions and Communityes and all my love is towards individualls for instance I hate the tribe of Lawyers, but I love Councellor such a one, Judge such a one for so with Physicians (I will not speak of my own Trade)

> Soldiers, English, Scotch, French; and the rest but principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I hartily love John, Peter, Thomas and so forth. this is the system upon which I have governed my self many years (but do not tell) and so I shall go on till I have done with them.[34]

"What is man," Merwin asks in "The Gods," "that he should be infinite/ The music of a deaf planet" (p.31). And we hear an echo, this time from Psalms 8.4, which confirms man's dominion over Nature, but asks: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Merwin's concerns are universal. Natural laws governing selectivity, which maintain an ecological balance and a universal proportion, are themselves threatened by man's atrocities. Though the tables of his calculations exalt his dominance over Nature, they are also a testament of his destruction. Each year the sentient creatures that man named, in the biblical account of creation, are diminished. They are fixed in museums with "Their eyes full of cotton" (p.41), or seen, perhaps for the last time in the flesh, through that technological eye, the telescopic gun sight--the window with the blind cross that we see in "The Animals":

> All these years behind windows
> With blind crosses sweeping the tables
>
> And myself tracking over empty ground
> Animals I never saw
>
> I with no voice
>
> Remembering names to invent for them
> Will any come back will one
>
> Saying yes
>
> Saying look carefully yes

We will meet again (p.3).

"Track": the verb suggests a predatory action; that is not its original meaning, but what it has come to connote. It comes from OFr. _trac_, "track of horses, mules, trace of animals," and probably of Teutonic origin: Dutch _trek_, a "drawing," _trecken_, "to draw, travel, march," et cetera.

The title of the poem, in plural form, assures us that it is not one animal (from L _anima_, "breath," "soul") that is being driven to extinction but many of them. At least one that will follow, and some that have already gone, are listed in "For a Coming Extinction," in which natural, rhythmic sequences are conspicuously broken. These convey both the emotion of the poet and the breaks in the evolutionary chain that occur with every extinction:

Gray whale
Now that we are sending you to The End
That great god
Tell him
That we who follow you invented forgiveness
And forgive nothing

I write as though you could understand
And I could say it
One must always pretend something
Among the dying
When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks
Empty of you
Tell him that we were made
On another day
The bewilderment will diminish like an echo
Winding along your inner mountains
Unheard by us
And find its way out

Leaving behind it the future
Dead
And ours

When you will not see again

The whale calves trying the light
Consider what you will find in the black garden
And its court
The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas
The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless
And fore-ordained as stars
Our sacrifices
Join your word to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important (pp.68-69).

Throughout The Lice, the evidence of man's occluded vision is damning. Even the human animal is not excluded from the slaughter. Genocide is evident in "The Asians Dying," and premeditated murder with political involvement is implied in "News of the Assassin," which, Jan B. Gordon has pointed out, stirs memories of the assassination of John F. Kennedy at 1 P.M. on November 22, 1963:[35]

The clock strikes one one one
Through the window in a line pass
The bees whose flower is death

Why the morning smelled of honey

Already how long it is since the harvest
The dead animal fallen all the same way

On the stroke the wheels recall
That they are water
An empty window has overtaken me

After the bees comes the smell of cigars
In the lobby of darkness (p.28).

The image of a telescopic gun sight is seen again, as another human being is yoked in death to the greater family of animals. The clock repeats the hour as though stunned, or is itself sounding the death knell. And, perhaps, we are reminded of Donne's famous admonition. The clocks in Merwin's poetry, like the calendars, are never accurate because, in reality, both are a spatial misrepresentation of time, and are more accurate as metaphors of man's propensity to divide, separate, abstract, and classify.

The compound image of the "flower," "honey," and "bees" gathering death, is fascinating. It has a literary antecedent, found in Romeo's soliloquy over what he takes to be the corpse of Juliet: "Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath" (Rom. V.iii.92). But I cannot regard the metaphor as simply an allusion to another tragedy. It captures instead the innate attraction that violence and death seem to have for us. We stockpile atomic weapons, forget that "We are the echo of the future" (p.33), and busy ourselves more with survival than with living. In "The River of Bees," Merwin reminds us:

> On the door it says what to do to survive
> But we were not born to survive
> Only to live (p.33).

The limitation of vision as a dominant mode of understanding is evident throughout The Lice. To the reader of The Lice, habits of visual synthesis can be an actual hindrance. There is, for instance, still a natural tendency to regard a poem as a written construct, the words of which are bounded by the fixity of space. Consequently, literal meaning or that "according to the letter" may be thought to be, like the spatialized words themselves, "necessarily trim and easily manageable." But, as Ong has also theorized, "a complex and polysemous utterance is no clearer when it is written down, nor its meaning any simpler. We are surer that we can recover it word for word. That is all. But word for word, it may convey only a very obscure sense." Consistently similar misreadings of Merwin's poetry, only a few of which I have shown so far, often seem to be a testament not to the obscurity of the poems themselves but to the extreme literacy of the critics--what Ong terms a "typographic squint."[36]

Since the publication in 1963 of The Moving Target, we have become aware of what was apparent in that collection of poems: we were nearing the end of the Gutenberg era with its concomitant stress on visualism and the visually fostered perspective of linearity, and were entering an electronic, or oral-aural era, with its emphasis upon the auditory and upon simultaneity. This cultural shift is assiduously documented in Ong's study of contemporary culture, In The Human Grain, which was published in 1967, four years after The Moving Target and in the same year as The Lice.

Changes in verbal communications media predicate changes in the way man thinks, so much so that man may be viewed, as Merwin views him in "The Hydra" (p.5), as a fabulous many-headed beast whose individual heads cannot be destroyed, but are constantly being replaced. Similarly, as Ong explains, modern man is not returning to the earlier sound world of preliterate man, because there is no way back: "The successive verbal media do not abolish one another but overlie one another."[37] Such contiguity is apparent in Merwin's poetry.

The affinities between Merwin's recent poems and modes of an earlier oral world, and the resonances and stylistic similarity with the spoken idiom, appear to contradict the primacy of their printed form. But this necessary enigma is suspended in metaphor. The poem itself, in Merwin's poetry, is always allied with song or, more specifically, with birds. But, in "It is March," the poem is characterized as a "wingless bird":

When you look back there is always the past
Even when it has vanished
But when you look forward
With your dirty knuckles and the wingless
Bird on your shoulder
What can you write   (p.17).

Sometimes these "birds" fly and sometimes, overdomesticated as some species have become, they fail. Such failures "are the poets' pigeons," Merwin said when he was poetry editor of The Nation.[38] Merwin has always feared domestication, and one of his own failures is acknowledged in "Fly":

I have been cruel to a fat pigeon
Because he would not fly
All he wanted was to live like a friendly old man

He had let himself become a wreck filthy and confiding
Wild for his food beating the cat off the garbage
Ignoring his mate perpetually snotty at the beak
Smelling waddling having to be
Carried up the ladder at night content

Fly I said throwing him into the air
But he would drop and run back expecting to be fed
I said it again and again throwing him up
As he got worse
He let himself be picked up every time
Until I found him in the dovecote dead
Of the needless efforts

So that is what I am

Pondering his eye that could not
Conceive that I was a creature to run from

I who have always believed too much in words (p.73).

The last line of the poem should alert readers to its metaphoric ambience. Three critics have commented on this poem. One of them, without any justification, says that "Merwin imagines his bird/soul as a 'fat pigeon' that he tries to force to fly," but that the lice-infested "fat bird of the self is too weighted down with a dying past for any hope of transcendence."[39] The other two critics--and this is not uncommon in Merwin criticism--seem to obliquely support Ong's theory that "an alphabetic culture, which puts a premium on visualist qualities such as sharp outline and clear cut sequence, is likely to regard the literal meaning, as something altogether wholesome and altogether desirable, and to regard other remote, perhaps more profoundly symbolic, meanings with disfavor."[40] Both critics give completely literal readings of the poem. One of them regards the speaker "as the killer of a trusting animal,"[41] and the other regards the poem as "one of Merwin's finest," but as "a confession of what man's will does to the world and to all living things with its concerted and self-righteous destructiveness."[42] Such interpretations of Merwin's poetry are quite common. This would not be disturbing except that, too often, critics posit the limitations and negation of their own analysis as a product of the poem. They do not see Merwin's books as part of a continuous development, nor his individual poems as interrelated aspects of a process: to do less is to fragment Merwin's poetic achievement.

The last poem in The Lice, "Looking for Mushrooms at Sunrise" (p.80), confirms the continuation of Merwin's odyssey. Again, he departs--one might almost say that he is called--at daybreak: "When it is not yet day/ I am walking on centuries of dead chestnut leaves/ In a place without grief/ Though the oriole/ Out of another life warns me/ That I am awake." The "oriole" is a bird, named for its golden color. It is not the golden bird that awakens the poet, but the "gold chanterelles," or mushrooms, the name of which comes from the French verb chanter, "to sing." They call him to "the mountain"--that archetypal place where one seeks revelation: "Where they appear it seems I have been before/ I recognize their haunts as though remembering/ Another life." He questions, even in that moment, "Where else" he might be looking for himself, and in so doing projects his odyssey beyond physical and temporal limits.

In Merwin's next volume, The Carrier of Ladders, he continues to explore the familiar themes of man's divisiveness. But equally, and with more conviction, he espouses both in theme and in style the tenets of primitive man's faith.

For reasons of exposition, it has become necessary to make a distinction between the "wisdom" of primitive man and that of modern man. Merwin does not make this distinction. As is evident in The Carrier of Ladders, he views such wisdom as a "loss that has not left this place" ("The Different Stars," p.8).

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

[1] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin: 'What Has Escaped Us We Bring With Us,'" *The Massachusetts Review*, 14 (Summer 1973), p.571.

[2] "Notes for a Preface," in *The Destinctive Voice: Twentieth Century American Poetry*, ed. William J. Martz (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p.272. Quoted in Ramsey, p.572.

[3] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," p.572.

[4] "Notes for a Preface," p.272.

[5] Ibid., p.272,270,271.

[6] *The Lice* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p.25. All subsequent references to *The Lice* are given by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[7] Merwin is quoting Fragment 92; see Philip Wheelwright, *Heraclitus* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), p.83, where a slightly different translation is given.

[8] "Approaches and Removals: W. S. Merwin's Encounter with Whitman's America," *Shenandoah*, 29 (Spring 1978), p.65.

[9] "The Dwelling of Disappearance: W. S. Merwin's *The Lice*," *Modern Poetry Studies*, 3, No.3 (1972), 123.

[10] "A Riddle for the New Year: Affirmation in W. S. Merwin," *Modern Poetry Studies*, 4, No.3 (1973), p.289.

[11] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," pp.584-85.

[12] Ibid., p.574.

[13] Wheelwright, p.13.

[14] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," p.574.

[15] Walter J. Ong, S. J. The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion Book, 1970), pp.8,7,162.

[16] Presence of the Word, pp.126,127.

[17] See C. G. Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, in The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, 2nd ed. (1968), ed. Sir Herbert Read et al., trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, and Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954-), 1.1, 42-53; and "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," ibid., pp.151-81.

[18] Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle, 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1973), p.69.

[19] Theodore Roethke, "An American Poet Introduces Himself," and "On Identity," in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle and London: Univ. of Washington Press, Washington Paperback ed., 1966), pp.10,23.

[20] Wheelwright, p.15.

[21] "The Writing on the Void: The Poetry of W. S. Merwin," The Iowa Review, 1, No.3 (Summer 1970), p.92; his emphasis.

[22] The Encyclopedia of Occult Sciences, Introduction by

M. C. Poinsot (New York, 1939; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1972), p.182; he cites Desbarolles as authority.

[23] See C. G. Jung, "On Psychic Energy," On the Nature of the Psyche, 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1973), p.25.

[24] Ong has a useful discussion of Aristotle's understanding of enthymeme in Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture (Ithaca & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p.12.

[25] In Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p.271.

[26] "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Selected Essays, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p.248.

[27] "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Journals, selected with an Introduction by Lewis Mumford (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p.257.

[28] McLuhan and Watson (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p.55.

[29] Ibid.

[30] "Notes for a Preface," pp.271,272.

[31] "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," p.579.

[32] "'Tireless Quest': A Conversation with W. S. Merwin," ed. Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, The English Record, 19 (February 1969), p.13.

[33] Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.92.

[34] The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), iii, 103.

[35] "The Dwelling of Disappearance," p.131.

[36] Presence of the Word, pp.46,47,22.

[37] Ibid., p.9.

[38] Quoted in David Ossman, The Sullen Art: Interviews by David Ossman with Modern American Poets (New York: Corinth Books, 1963), p.71.

[39] Folsom, "Approaches and Removals," p.65.

[40] Presence of the Word, p.47.

[41] Ramsey, "The Continuities of W. S. Merwin," p.573.

[42] Vern Rutsala, "The End of the Owls," rev. of The Lice, by W. S. Merwin, The Far Point, 2 (1969), 44.

CHAPTER FIVE - THROUGH THE MIRROR: 'THE CARRIER OF LADDERS'

Merwin derived the title of The Carrier of Ladders (1970) from one of four Dahomean songs, translated by Frances Herskovits in 1934, which anticipate the major themes and, in a fundamental way, the style of Merwin's recent poetry. These songs delimit man's place in the order of creation and invoke deities to preserve the earth from destruction. But the particular song, "For the Earth God," from which the title is taken, proclaims the "need to sing" in a "day of trouble":

> Thy need is great,
> And great our need to sing,
> For days of trouble are upon us.
>
> The bullock of Abomey
> Says to him of Cana,
> It is the day of trouble;
> The carrier of grain,
> Says to the bearer of salt,
> Thy load is heavy, brother,
> And this the day for carrying;
> The bearer of the dead
> Says to the carrier of ladders,
> It is the day for carrying loads,
> It is the day of trouble.[1]

This song is one of many such responses to the imperial domination that so radically changed the life and habitat of these preliterate people. It is not an articulate response, but one couched in metaphor, one that reveals not only an atypical mode of thought but the essence of primitive language, "this language with its limited vocabulary able to express any message by combinations of oppositions between its constitutive units, this logic of comprehension for which contents are indissociable from form."[2]

Stylistic affinities between the Dahomean songs and Merwin's recent poetry, together with his espousal of oral or preliterate modes of understanding as a means of informing contemporary modes of consciousness, establishes a context. And many of the poems in The Carrier of Ladders are themselves, like the Dahomean songs, a response to a "day of trouble." In Merwin's acceptance speech for the Pulitzer Prize, awarded to him for this volume, he said: "after years of the news from Southeast Asia, and the commentary from Washington, I am too conscious of being an American to accept public congratulation with good grace, or to welcome it except as an occasion for expressing openly a shame which many Americans feel day after day, helplessly and in silence." After accepting the award, Merwin requested that the prize money be divided between a man who was blinded in a police-action in San Francisco and the Draft Resistance.[3]

The similarities, as Merwin views them, between the plight of contemporary man and the plight of the Dahomeans are significant. And the stylistic affinities between many of the poems in The Carrier of Ladders and the Dahomean songs are equally significant. The latter will be discussed immediately, while the former will be evident in a discussion of individual poems from this volume.

The role of the song in Dahomey was complex, and its uses were so varied as to make categorization almost impossible. According to Melville J. Herskovits,[4] the tersely metaphoric songs were the "prime carriers of history" for these preliterate people, whose "troubadours" were "keepers of the records" that provided the only access to their tribal past. As such, these songs were the sole means of education. They contained the heritage of the Dahomeans and nourished a cultural identity through a complex variety of social functions.

Proverbs contributed significantly, both to the songs to which they added their characteristic terseness and metaphoric depth, and to the daily life of the people to which they added the wisdom of ancient lore. Herskovits notes:

> Proverbs are based almost entirely upon oblique reference, and in their stylistic terseness there is compressed so much of innuendo and elliptical allusion to the social scene that the stranger can grasp the meaning of these aphorisms only after a long discussion about each of them with a native, probing for situations when it would be used and the exact meaning it would be intended to convey.

In a footnote, he adds that subsequent scholarship has "more than amply proved" the original thesis "that an analytical study of the proverbs of an African people, from the point of view of their real meaning to those who employ them, is one of the surest roads to an understanding of the inner sanctions and of the thought processes of that people."

Generally, what has been said about Dahomean song is equally applicable to Merwin's recent poetry. It is filled with "innuendo and elliptical allusion" which, consistently, reflect the "inner sanctions" and the "thought processes" of the group or culture that employs them. Some of these, mostly in the form of echoes, have already been pointed out. Many more will be apparent in the subsequent discussion of individual poems. Two examples from Merwin's poem "Fear" will indicate his use of elliptical allusion. There is nothing esoteric about these allusions; as I have pointed out, they are more in the nature of echoes. A reader would immediately recognize them as being part of the common stock of the idiom, though he may not necessarily be aware of their original context.

The examples from "Fear" will be presented without explanation. The poem consists of well over one hundred and twenty enjambed lines that cannot be separated into integral parts:

> in everything made of
> human agency or divine fear is
> in the answer also and shall pierce thy
> bosom too fear three gathered together
> four five etcetera
> . . . .
> moving across fear before which they burn
> in rows in red glass bleeding upwards their
> hearts smoke in the gusts on earth as it is
> in heaven with the sentence beginning
> before the heavens were or the earth
> had out of fear been called and any began
> (pp.83,85).

The first example contains echoes from Matthew on church discipline, forgiveness, and the brotherhood of prayer: "if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask" and "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (18.19, 20-21).

Ironically, given the time in which "Fear" was written, a gathering of "four" or "five" people might easily have been construed by civil authorities not as evidence of brotherhood but as something to be feared, like a demonstration capable of inciting civil rebellion. The allusion, within the context of the poem, is compounded, so that either interpretation is not only credible but necessary.

Similarly, in the second example, the apotheosis of fear is seen in the ironic context of words and rhythms which echo the biblical creation myth, the Lord's prayer, and a symbolic act of public worship.

These two examples from "Fear," which is really an atypical poem in The Carrier of Ladders, are not similar in style or theme to the Dahomean songs. But one poem, "Man With One Leaf in October Night," is similar, and is comprised of "innuendo and elliptical allusion":

> The leaves turn black when they have learned how to fly
> so does the day
> but in the wind of the first hours of darkness
> sudden joy sent
> from an unknown tree
> I have not deserved you (p.110).

Visual and verbal clichés in the title and opening lines of the poem (man with one leaf, and time flies) evoke the image of fallen man: he had tasted the forbidden fruit of the tree, and had gained not only a knowledge of good and evil but an awareness of his mortality, and of the enmity that would exist between man and woman. Merwin reverses this traditionally bleak image with a single conjunction which, even with the knowledge of death, shows him rejoicing in love and in common humanity, the paradigm of which is the family tree.

What is common to this poem, other poems in The Carrier of Ladders, and the Dahomean songs is not so much what is said but how it is said. A different reading of "Man With One Leaf in October Night" is not only possible but probable (other interpretations have occurred to me). What is important is not the message but the metaphors, which offer themselves as a way of seeing. They are not the tools of analysis with which things are taken apart, but means of the imagination that draw things together.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his study The Savage Mind, makes a distinction between two modes of thought. That which characterizes the "savage mind" he terms "analogical," while that which characterizes civilized man's "domesticated thought" he terms "analytical." The former accurately describes that which is reflected in Dahomean Song and, to a marked degree, much of Merwin's recent poetry. Lévi-Strauss says:

> The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel. A multitude of images form simultaneously, none exactly like any other, so that no single one furnishes more than a partial knowledge of the decoration and furniture but the group is characterized by invariant properties expressing a truth. The savage mind deepens its knowledge with the help of *imagines mundi*. It builds mental structures which facilitate an understanding of the world in as much as they resemble it. In this sense savage

> thought can be defined as analogical thought.
>
> But in this sense too it differs from domesticated thought, of which historical knowledge constitutes one aspect. The concern for continuity which inspires the latter is indeed a manifestation, in the temporal order, of knowledge which is interstitial and unifying rather than discontinuous and analogical: instead of multiplying objects by schemes promoted to the role of additional objects, it seems to transcend an original discontinuity by relating objects to one another. But it is this reason, wholly concerned with closing gaps and dissolving differences, which can properly be called 'analytical'.[5]

Another way of expressing this would be to use Jung's terms. He, also, conceives of "two kinds of thinking." There is "directed or logical thinking" which, he says, "is an altogether conscious phenomenon" that has developed in a relatively short period of time, and has "produced a readjustment of the human mind to which we owe our modern empiricism and technics." The other, older type of thinking, he calls "fantasy thinking," which he believes to be allied, or parallel, to the "mythological thinking of ancient man and the similar thinking found in children, primitives, and in dreams."[6] I am tempted to think that Merwin would agree with Jung--particularly when I read the poem that will be discussed next. But a full disclosure of my reasons for thinking so would constitute an altogether different study than this one.

There are many poems in The Carrier of Ladders which exemplify the viewpoint of Lévi-Strauss and Jung. In one poem, "Teachers," there is not just an intuition of primitive thought, such as appears in "The Child" in Merwin's previous volume, but direct evidence of it, evidence suspended in metaphor. Wheras "The Child" is predominantly discursive and analytical, "Teachers" is both discursive and analytical, and "discontinuous and analogical." And meaning, as is so often the case with primitive language, resides not simply in the words of the poem but in the "combination of oppositions between its constitutive units":

> Pain is in this dark room like many speakers
> of a costly set though mute
> as here the needle and the turning
>
> the night lengthens it is winter
> a new year
>
> what I live for I can seldom believe in
> who I love I cannot go to
> what I hope is always divided
>
> but I say to myself you are not a child now
> if the night is long remember your unimportance
> sleep
>
> then toward morning I dream of the first words
> of books of voyages
> sure tellings that did not start by justifying
>
> yet at one time it seems
> had taught me (p.4).

"Teachers" is comprised of six stanzas. The first three are analogical and discontinuous. Nothing connects them; and meaning resides as much "in the combination of oppositions between" the "constitutive units" as in their words. In contrast, the last three stanzas are logical and discursive. The contrast between both halves of the poem is further dramatized at the mid-point by the first word of the fourth stanza, "but," which is itself a conjunction expressing opposition, contradiction, or antithesis. The primary words of the remaining two stanzas, "then" and "yet," not only connect the stanzas logically, but establish a sense of temporal continuity.

In "Teachers," Merwin is exploring and, at the same time, demonstrating differences in the primitive and civilized use of the word and showing the different psychic attitudes that evolve through such use.

The subject of the first stanza is "pain." "Pain," from L poena, is a "penalty" or a "punishment" which, in this poem, is allied with literacy. The "dark room" is, as I pointed out earlier, a book--a book in which "speakers" are "mute[d]," and in which records are kept: "as here the needle and the turning" (a record, or plastic disc, is also implicit in the image). The point of this stanza is that literacy, with all its benefits, has not only muted the voice of the poet but has effectively nullified the past. The exact opposite is true of oral cultures. As Ong has theorized, preliterate people do not "elect to be 'imaginative' or 'concrete' or 'oriental' rather than abstract or scientific"; they simply do not have a writing system on which "elaborate and dispassionate causal analyses and sharp abstract categorization depends."[7] The past and the primitive imagination no longer survive in psychic structures but have been "domesticated" and relegated to the abstractions of which history is comprised. The poet and memory, the muse, are no longer the essential carrier of preserved wisdom.

The second stanza has no logical or grammatical connection with the first. The subject of "pain" is dropped, but its causes are not: "the night lengthens it is winter/ a new year." This stanza is comprised of three disjunct phrases, and three abstractions with which man has arrested time. Whereas modern man's propensity to divide, to classify, and to abstract is shown in the three phrases to be daily, seasonally, and annually, Merwin does not connect them. But, as a consequence of having been taught to be logical and analytical, Merwin expresses a natural feeling of ambivalence--itself a manifestation of division: "what I live for I can seldom believe in/ who I love I cannot go to/ what I hope is always divided." These three phrases are parallel. And, although they begin with the same primary consonant, are bluntly assertive and metrically close, and are each comprised of abstractions, they remain unconnected. The meaning of this stanza is purposefully occluded. What Merwin lives for, whom he loves, and what he hopes, can only be guessed. The knowledge conveyed by the lines is incomplete, can never be completed, intentionally so. The words draw attention not to a limited meaning but to themselves. They draw attention to what they are, not what they might represent. They are a series of negative abstractions which demonstrate, in an analogical mode, the limitations of analytical expression. Yet, at the same time, they delineate the cause of the "pain," the cause of the poet's spiritual malaise.

At this point, the poem changes to a discursive and analytical mode: "but I say to myself you are not a child now/ if the night is long remember your unimportance/ sleep." The reference to the "child," and also a series of words in the preceding stanza, echoes the poem by the same title in The Lice. It also echoes Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians 13.11, in which he attempts to heal divisions within the church by explaining man's fallibility, his incomplete knowledge: "when I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Using analogy, Paul elaborates: "For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then, face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (13.12-13, emphasis mine). Substituting "belief" for "faith," Merwin echoes Paul's words: "what I live for I can seldom believe in/ Who I love I cannot go to/ what I hope is always divided" (emphasis mine.)

Whatever divisive tendencies may stem from analytical thought, the poet can never relinquish it; nor can he ever return to the preliterate world of which the child is the archetype. As Ong has acknowledged, and as I pointed out in the last chapter, "successive verbal media do not abolish one another but overlie one another."[8] Merwin also makes this clear. He reminds himself that he is not a "child." But in sleep, when the conscious mind asserts the least influence, he dreams of the first words:

> then toward morning I dream of the first words
> of books of voyages
> sure tellings that did not start by justifying

yet at one time it seems
had taught me.

Books "had taught" the poet, but only in fragmented pieces ("telling" is the verbal of "tell," "to mention one by one, or piece by piece"). The final verb, in the past tense, confirms the significance of the poem's title, "Teachers."

The reference to dreaming in this poem and, also, the archetypal image of the "child" are more significant than they would at first appear. Jung, corroborating Nietzsche's view, claims that "dream-thinking should be regarded as a phylogenetically older mode of thought." Dreams, he says, are never expressed in logical or abstract ways, "but always in the language of parable or simile." This is also true of primitive languages he points out. And, he adds: "Just as the body bears the traces of its phylogenetic development, so also does the human mind. Hence there is nothing surprising about the possibility that the figurative language of dreams is a survival from an archaic mode of thought."[9] The relative absence of this mode of thought, he says elsewhere, impoverishes modern man. "We have become rich in knowledge," he concludes, "but poor in wisdom."[10]

A similar temporal theme, and one that also involves literacy (the "book"), is continued in "The Piper." The poem is an ironic self-parody in which Merwin juxtaposes the pangs of literary composition to those of natural birth. These are two stanzas from "The Piper"--a figure also out of childhood and of the oral world--from whom, Merwin concludes, he is "almost ready to learn":

It is twenty years
since I first looked for words
for me now
whose wisdom or something would stay me
I chose to
trouble myself about the onset
of this
it was remote it was grievous
it is true I was still a child

I was older then
than I hope ever to be again
that summer sweating in the attic
in the foreign country
high above the piper but hearing him
once
and never moving from my book
and the narrow
house full of pregnant women
floor above floor
waiting
in that city
where the sun was the one bell (p.28).

The way that man thinks and the way in which he views his world is perhaps predicated, as Benjamin Whorf maintains, on the structure and lexicon of his native language.[11] By exploring the primitive use of language, and by espousing preliterate modes of thought, Merwin is showing some of the divisive tendencies inherent in our language and reflected in our civilization. This theme, in an atemporal sequence, weaves throughout The Carrier of Ladders and scores Merwin's odyssey. (A reader would arrive at the same conclusion by isolating and then tracing references to memory, and its related forms, throughout Merwin's poetry.)

The first poem in The Carrier of Ladders reintroduces the theme of modern man's divisiveness. It is entitled "Plane":

We hurtle forward and seem to rise

I imagine the deities come and go
without departures

and with my mind infinitely divided and hopeless
like a stockyard seen from above
and my will like a withered body muffled
in qualifications until it has no shape
I bleed in my place

where is no
vision of the essential nakedness of the gods
nor of that
nakedness the seamless garment of heaven

nor of any other
nakedness

Here
is the air

and your tears flowing on the wings of the plane
where once again I cannot
reach to stop them

and they fall away behind
going with me (p.3).

The title "Plane," unrestricted by an article, is an ironic metaphor of transcendence, and it evokes the illusion of progress, which is confirmed in the ironic opening line: "We hurtle forward and seem to rise." The presence of the copula, "seem," and the violence associated with the word "hurtle" (cf. "hurt," "to strike"), betrays any notions of temporal achievement which might otherwise be evoked by the infinitive "to rise." The irony is compounded and a characteristically primitive, or polytheistic, belief is introduced by the plural "deities": "I imagine the deities come and go/ without departures" (cf. L _partire_, "to divide").

The third stanza delineates the theme in metaphoric transformations, but in contrast to the preceding stanza, it makes an important distinction between the imagination which does not divide and the "mind" which does:

> and with my mind infinitely divided and hopeless
> like a stockyard seen from above
> and my will like a withered body muffled
> in qualifications until it has no shape
> I bleed in my place.

Division is shown to stem from a faculty of the mind as opposed to that of the imagination, or the faculty for image-making, which is commonly associated with primitive or pre-literate cultures. In the same stanza, the simile of the stockyard equates contemporary existence with that of penned animals, an existence, as we notice in the final line of the stanza, that is subject to confinement and untimely death. Any difference between human existence and that of penned animals is nullified by the inefficacy of the human "will," which is likened to a "withered body."

The whole stanza evokes the horror of systematic carnage but, more significantly, it defines conceptual division as a disease: "wither" is itself a disease of cattle, and its suffix denotes division or separation. The fourth and fifth stanzas emphasize the present poverty of the imagination. Things are not seen in their "essential nakedness" but are clothed in abstractions:

> where is no
> vision of the essential nakedness of the gods
> nor of that
> nakedness the seamless garment of heaven
>
> nor of any other
> nakedness.

And this sorrow, "your tears," though it may appear to "fall away behind" from the "wings" of progress--that is if time is habitually viewed as horizontal and in movement--is shown to actually accompany us:

> and your tears flowing on the wings of the plane
> where once again I cannot
> reach to stop them
>
> and they fall away behind
> going with me.

The same theme is explored in "The Different Stars" (pp.7-8): "I tend to think of division as the only evil/ when perhaps it is merely my own." This poem is in a personal mode and, like so many of Merwin's other poems, it documents his search for viable means of articulation. But, as with "Teachers" and "Plane," it has a more important epistemological base, which is grounded in the poem by the infinitive "to think." The poem begins:

> I could never have come to the present without you
> remember that
> from whatever stage we may again
> watch it appear
>
> with its lines clear
> pain
> having come from there
>
> so that we may well wonder
> looking back on us here what tormented us
> what great difficulty invisible
> in a time that by then looks simple
> and is irrevocable
>
> pain having come from there
> my love
> I tend to think of division as the only evil
> when perhaps it is merely my own.

At this point in the poem, many readers--particularly those experiencing the poem for the first time--are likely to feel alienated, cut adrift from the security of literal meaning. The first line is unclear because, among other things, there is no antecedent for "you." The lines that follow it are equally occluded. They are comprised of a series of abstractions which do not evoke images because they are unrelated to sensory criteria. They do not feed the imagination; they tax the mind. This, of course, is Merwin's intention, to make the reader experience for himself the effect of abstractions which isolate man in sequences of time.

In contrast to the preceding lines, the poem is suddenly transfused with concrete images, with analogical expression. And these images are not only vital, but vitally interrelated:

> that unties
> one day the veins one the arteries
> that prizes less
> as it receives than as it loses
> that breaks the compasses
> cannot be led or followed
> cannot choose what to carry
> into grief
> even
> unbinds will unbind
> unbinds our hands
> pages of the same story.

As a semantic exploration, the poem violates grammatical expectancies and creates ambiguity, creates a semantic flux in which the words themselves cause conceptual dislodgement and necessitate the reader's participation. Time, in the form of "the present" in the first line, is what has been and is being divided and abstracted both in and outside of the poem.

This is apparent if we turn to the first stanza again and note the successive transformations of "the present" throughout the remainder of the poem: "it," "there," "here," "there," "now," "this place," and so on.

To spatialize and divide time, whether sidereal time ("stars"), as implied in this poem, or time as it is reflected in the logical consistency of tense, is to impose a stasis that is alien. It fosters notions of progress while, at the same time, it vitiates the wisdom of the past, of our preliterate ancestors. We are reminded by the title, "The Different Stars," that no such stasis exists in the natural world. The poem ends:

> what is it
> they say can turn even this into wisdom
> and what is wisdom if it is not
> now
> in the loss that has not left this place
>
> oh if we knew
> if we knew what we needed if we even knew
> the stars would look to us to guide them.

The theme of the poem and the mode of presentation are indissociable, reflecting both analytical and analogical modes of awareness. Both are necessary to the poem and both, the poem implies, are necessary to man if he is to sustain viable contact with his world.

An analytical mode of awareness is paramount in the first half of the poem and induces an ambivalence through the extended grammatical abstractions of "the present," which, like a Decker cube, appears to change randomly from present, to future, to past, and back to present again.

Negative abstractions, "stage," "lines," "pain," and "invisible difficulty," facilitate this disturbing ambivalence. By contrast, the second half of the poem asserts an analogical mode of awareness, and opposes these abstractions with concrete images: "veins," "arteries," "compasses," "pages of the same story," and "stars."

Then, in conclusion, Merwin asks "what is it/ they say can turn even this into wisdom/ and what is wisdom if it is not/ now/ in the loss that has not left this place." The loss that has not left this place" is the past, which, like the present and the future, exists only in abstraction. But "the loss that has not left this place" is also that of an analogical mode of awareness which characterizes both the poem and the persistence of the primitive imagination, the diminution of which over the past few centuries does not obscure its presence.

Whereas Merwin, in previous volumes, satirizes the divisive tendencies of analytical thought ("Division, mother of pain," The Moving Target, p.53; "Who made time provided also its fools/ Strapped in watches and with ballots for their choices," The Lice, p.50), he now integrates the tenets of both analytical and analogical thought in an essential union.

The source of the title, "The Different Stars," is found, significantly, in I Cor. 15.41: "there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory." Paul's epistle deals, in part, specifically with language. He appeals to the Corinthians: "that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1.10). And Paul defends his preaching, insisting that he does not rely upon human wisdom, and that Christian revelation owes nothing to it:

> And my speech and my preaching were not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. However, we speak wisdom among them that are perfect; yet not the wisdom of this age, or of the princes of this age, that come to nothing; But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the ages unto our glory. (2.4-7).

Merwin considers his own poems to be a "Spirit," a gift; and he considers poetry to be a manifestation of "the great language itself, the vernacular of the *imagination* that at one time was common to men" (emphasis mine).[12] Undoubtedly, Merwin is referring to primitive or preliterate man. Commentary on "The Different Stars" could be extended. It generates meaning beyond the perimeters of the page and shares light with both the sacred and the profane.

Though the theme of division is never again, in *The Carrier of Ladders*, explicitly stated, as it is in "The Different Stars," it is repeatedly alluded to: "I am the son of division" (p.95); "I see tongues being divided" (p.107); "the light is not yet/ divided" (p.123).

Another poem in *The Carrier of Ladders* that has a similar theme and also explores the ramifications of literacy and man's propensity to divide, to abstract, and even to destroy, is "Shoe Repairs":

> Long after the scheduled deaths of animals
> their skins made up into couples
> have arrived here
> empty
> from many turnings
> between the ways of men
> and men
>
> In a side street
> by brown walls over a small light
> the infinite routes
> which they follow a little way
> come together
> to wait in rows in twos
> soles
> eyes of masks
> from a culture lost forever
>
> We will know the smell
> in another life
> stepping down
> barefoot into this Ark
> seeing it lit up but empty
> the destined racks
> done with the saved pairs
> that went out to die each alone (p.66).

"Shoe Repairs" has nothing to do with the commercial meaning of the title, at least not in the sense that the phrase has come to connote. In Merwin's recent poetry, the image of shoes is a familiar one and indicates civilized man's divisiveness, his willingness to separate himself from the earth, and his destruction of animal creation.

The initial phrase "the scheduled deaths of animals," which implies further slaughter, is ironic. "Plans for future procedure" is a secondary meaning of "schedule," which, though it is necessary to the poem, is subordinate. Long before such "skins made up into couples" ("shoes") served man's material needs, they served his spiritual ones--as "eyes of masks." C.M. Bowra assures us, though not in connection with Merwin's poetry, that through such animal-masks man once saw his "place in nature and his undoubted kinship with and dependence on natural things."[13] Totemism, in a variety of forms, characterizes preliterate man and a time in which the word "schedule" had no existence; derived from Gr. schidē, "a split piece of wood," or from L scheda, "a leaf of paper or papyrus," the word "schedule" refers to planned events in a chirographic world since its etymology can be traced no further back.

/

The shoes "come together/ to wait in rows in twos/soles/ eyes of masks/ from a culture lost forever." Preliterate cultures have perhaps been "lost forever," but preliterate ways of seeing the world have not. Though "empty," the paired shoes still possess a figurative potency and, as souls ("soles"), a spiritual existence. And they do not simply "wait," they watch (cf. ME waiten, "to watch"). But the same phrase, "wait in rows in twos," also signifies literate man's propensity to separate, to abstract, and to classify.

Characteristically, Merwin finds affirmation in the belief that man will know another, sensual life:

> We will know the smell
> in another life
> barefoot into this Ark
> seeing it lit up but empty
> the destined racks
> done with the saved pairs
> that went out to die each alone   (emphasis mine).

There is no reason to suppose that Merwin envisions a "life" beyond this world. Like Pound, he seeks a "paradiso terrestre."[14]

The traditional image of ascent which precedes enlightenment is, in "Shoe Repairs," conspicuously reversed. "We will," Merwin says, step "down" into "another life," a life in which the senses will be very much alive. What Merwin is suggesting is that modern man must, if he is to survive, subsume other modes of awareness--specifically those afforded by his primitive imagination. He must, as the title of the poem denotes, "repair" (from L re + patria, "father," "native land"), or go back to his primal ways of knowing.

There are perhaps few means, other than that afforded by the primitive imagination, through which Merwin can continue to celebrate creation and yet, at the same time, to alert man to the suicidal destruction of the planet. In "Notes for a Preface," Merwin comments on poetry that merely decries contemporary existence:

> Here and there a form of art has become recognizable as a feature of the era. Stemming from a more or less deliberate and exclusive immersion in the metropolitan life of our time, it resorts perforce to increasingly extreme states of consciousness as though they were the desperate retreats of truth, yet its images are frequently at a remove from any direct and integrated sensual criteria. When it provokes recognition of anything it is usually of the squalid landscapes of a world made and polluted by man alone, from which it shows that there is no escape. It is not an art which I wish to decry nor to avoid, but I would hope not to be limited by it nor identified with it.[15]

John Bentley Mays comments on the renewed interest in preliterate cultures, and he briefly mentions Merwin's contribution as one of the poet-translators of Amerindian materials. Mays sees in this renewed interest some evidence of the "exhaustion of our own intellectual traditions," and he claims that the "extremity of our present dilemma--the unceasing escalation of war and anxiety on a planetary scale--forbids the closing of any door."[16]

One of the doors that Merwin opens in The Carrier of Ladders restores American history to a continuous present and subsumes the consciousness of yet another primitive race which was decimated by imperialism, that of the American Indian. In doing so, Merwin not only allows his reader to rediscover one of "the otherwise-extinct forms of consciousness which," Mays says, "may inform our responses to the future,"[17] but documents some historic precedents of "civilized" man's divisiveness. "Homeland," a poem with a pointedly ironic title, is one such door to the past:

> The sky goes on living it goes
> on living the sky
> with all the barbed wire of the west
> in its veins
> and the sun goes down
> driving a stake
> through the black heart of Andrew Jackson (p.50).

The poem begins with pristine simplicity, with the rhythm and repetition of a child's reader. But its aura of innocence is rapidly obscured by dark images of violence: "barbed wire" stuck in "veins" and a "stake" driven through a "black heart." These same implements, quite literally, aided in the acquisition of the American Indian's land and, ultimately, in the division of a continent.

The allusion to Andrew Jackson is not to the jingoistic portrait of him as a friend to the Indian but to the seventh president of the United States (1829-1837) who was the "most powerful exponent" of Indian Removal and of the Removal Bill of 1830. The passage of this bill sanctioned the "forcible uprooting and expulsion of sixty-thousand" American Indians from the Southern United States alone. These Indians were not nomadic people, a term which more accurately describes some of the white intruders, but an indigenous race who had established and built communities and whose attachment to the land was sacred. Their forced exodus lasted for ten years; and their "journey toward the setting sun" came to be known by them as the "Trail of Tears." Grant Foreman has documented this exodus in several volumes, particularly in Indian Removal,[18] through the direct presentation of original manuscripts. But the enormity of the crime, the human suffering and the cultural loss that resulted, will never be known: "little more than a suggestion of the realities is possible from the thousands of manuscripts that have contributed to this account."

The "barbed wire" in "Homeland" is symbolic of the divisive nature of civilized man, particularly in consideration of his brutal acquisition, and subsequent division, of the Indian's homeland. But Merwin's poem exists in a timeless present and not in the past. The "barbed wire" is still in "veins"; and in the veins it defines a malignancy which, like vampirism, is transmitted by the blood from generation to generation. No death other than that which is accorded a vampire--in the poem a death that is carried out by the setting sun each night (at which time the corpses of legendary vampires are reanimated in their coffins--can end the sickness. The stake is symbolically appropriate, because it also aided in the division of the land that the white man legally stole from the Indian (laws were passed in many states which declared that the word of an Indian was invalid against that of a white man).[19] To the Indian, these stakes were a sacrilege and a desecration of their Mother Earth, to whom annually, before each tilling, they offered prayers of forgiveness.

Another poem that is informed by Foreman's book, and one whose title and dedication, "The Removal," "to the endless tribe," confirms the allusion, contains further indications of the divisive nature of civilized man:

> I The Procession
>
> When we see
> the houses again
> we will know that we are asleep at last
>
> when we see
> tears on the road
> and they are ourselves
> we are awake
> the tree has been cut
> on which we were leaves
> the day does not know us
> the river where we cross does not taste salt
>
> the soles of our feet are black stars
> but ours is the theme
> of the light
>
> II The Homeless
>
> A clock keeps striking
> and the echoes move in files

their faces
have been lost
flowers of salt
tongues from lost languages
doorways closed with pieces of night

III A Survivor

The dust never settles
but through it tongue tongue comes walking
shuffling like breath
but the old speech
is still in its country
dead

IV The Crossing of the Removed

At the bottom of the river
black ribbons cross under
and the water tries to soothe them
the mud tries to soothe them
the stones turn over and over trying
to comfort them
but they will not be healed
where the rims cut
and the shadows
sawed carrying
mourners
and some that had used horses
and had the harness
dropped it in half way over
on the far side the ribbons come out
invisible

V A Widow Is Taken

I call leave me here
the smoke on the black path
was my children
I will not walk
from the house I warmed
but they carry me through the light
by blackening face
my red eyes
everywhere I leave
one white footprint
the trackers will follow us into the cold
the water is high
the boats have been stolen away
there are no shoes
and they pretend that I am a bride
on the way to a new house

VI The Reflection

Passing a broken window
they see
into each of them the wedge of blackness
pounded
it is nothing
it splits them
loose hair
bare heels
at last they are gone
filing on in vacant rooms (pp.60-62).

Like "Homeland," "The Removal" brings a period of American history into a timeless present in which it lives again. Contradictions appear to assert themselves immediately.

The concern for temporal continuity which, Lévi-Strauss maintains, characterizes modern man's "domesticated thought"[20] is absent. The poem reflects a consciousness that is analogous to that of the American Indian in its "timelessness," a consciousness that possesses few abstractions with which to denature life.

The homeless Indians, who form the "Trail of Tears" in "The Procession," know that they will never be allowed to return to their land. Yet, they cannot conceive of leaving it or of dying: "When we see/ the houses again/ we will know that we are asleep at last." Death, they believe, is merely a change of life in which they will become spirits, breath. And, although they may return to the stars, which, to the Pawnee, is where they came from, they may, together with all sentient creatures, wander through the realms that life has made familiar. These same Indians cannot even abstract their grief: "When we see/ tears on the road/ and they are ourselves/ we are awake." And, theirs is still the "theme/ of the light" because, according to Hartley Burr Alexander, light itself, they believe, is a manifestation of the supreme power, or Great Spirit, who resides above and whose radiant presence "reveals creation."[21]

The culpability of civilized man in the crime of Indian removal is confirmed within the poem by appeal to an archetypal image: "the tree has been cut/ on which we were leaves." The universality of this metaphor compels the reader to consider the crime of Indian removal as an act of genocide which time may judge to have been national suicide.

Merwin's concern for native tongues, for alternate modes of awareness, is evident throughout all of his books. In "The Removal," the singularity of the subtitle, "A Survivor," gives a realistic appraisal of what remains of the Indian's language. The "dust," an impediment to breathing and an indication of aridity, "never settles/ but through it tongue tongue comes walking/ shuffling like breath." Only shards of this culture remain, resurrected in these poems and in Merwin's "Crow Versions."[22] But the "old speech/ is still in its country/ dead."

"The Removal" evinces what could be termed a histrionic use of setting. But it is itself an expression of totemic belief that affirms the saliency of the primitive imagination: "tears" walk, "echoes move in files," "dust never settles," "water," "mud" and "stones" try to soothe scars on a land that "will not be healed." Only a fragmented and, therefore, realistic image of the Indian remains: "loose hair/ bare heels." But, in these same details--which are the emblems of Merwin's metaphoric notation, and which preclude further and perhaps maudlin embellishment--there is no judgment and no anger, not even indignation. The crime of Indian removal, though it gave name to a national policy, was committed daily over many years by many people. Yet, the poem remains true to that indigenous race in whose language there were not even "bad words": "If an Indian wanted to say bad words he must talk English."[23]

In another poem, "Western Country," "long/ files" of "exiles" are being herded into mountains. Though its "exiles" are not named they are, no doubt, Indians who are being removed by "each man with his gun/ his feet/ one finger's breadth off the ground." Doubtless, the men with guns are white and the soles of their boots measure, as the Indian knows, "one finger's breadth off the ground." This suggests not only the voracity of the armed men but also their separateness from the earth. The specific identifications that I have made seem tenuous. Certainly, the poem does not need them:

> Some days after so long even the sun
> is foreign
> I watch the exiles
> their stride
> stayed by their antique faith that no one
> can die in exile
> when all that is true is that death is not exile
>
> Each no doubt knows a western country
> half discovered
> which he thinks is there because
> he thinks he left it

> and its names are still written in the sun
> in his age and he knows them
> but he will never tread their ground
>
> At some distances I can no longer
> sleep
> my countrymen are more cruel than their stars
> and I know what moves the long
> files stretching into the mountains
> each man with his gun
> his feet
> one finger's breadth off the ground (p.48).

The mode of narration, first person present continuous, would appear to deny specific identifications, such as "exiles" with Indians. But the requisition of the Indian's land did accelerate statehood and increase the number of stars on the American flag: "my countrymen are more cruel than their stars." I am sure that if Merwin were asked to comment upon the ambience of this poem he would make a similar comment to that which he made in 1968 about the war in Vietnam and about his poem "The Asians Dying" (The Lice, p.63): "I would like to think that if such a book were opened years from now its readers wouldn't even know what it referred to. That's a strange thing to say without qualifying it. I mean the fact that this kind of war was ever possible would be something unimaginable, far in the past, not that those people's deaths were simply forgotten."[24]

Guilt should not persuade readers to look for maudlin sentiment where there is none, where there is no aureate diction to accommodate it. Civilized man, Merwin's poetry attests, is also an exile: "Look at their shoes/ to see how gravely/ they are hurt" ("Signs," p.118). His divisive ideologies can no longer vilify the primitive consciousness, which inspired the Indian to regard the earth as sacred, to tear up stakes, to break compasses and to refuse the white man's chair.

Irreparable ecological damage has so transfigured the American landscape that it would be difficult now to recognize the same continent that is described in William Bartram's Travels, first published in 1791, to whom Merwin pays homage in "Other Travelers to the River" (p.46); Bartram was among other Americans who saw not a savage Indian but an Adamic race. Another famous American, Emerson, feared that the government of the time must have thought that the American people had "become savage and mad." In a publicized letter to Martin van Buren, dated April 23, 1838 (which for some reason is not included in the several volumes of Emerson's letters), he bluntly informs the president that New England has no confidence in "the moral character of the government," because of its inhumane decision to implement "the proposed Indian measures" that ten years previously no one would have thought possible of execution. Emerson's opposition to the removal of the Cherokee tribes is eloquent: "a crime is projected that confounds our understandings by its magnitude,--a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country; for how should we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country, any more?"[25] But his protest was in vain, and after May 23, 1838, General

Winfield Scott, with a military force of 7,000, commenced the brutal transfer of some 15,000 Cherokees to the upper Arkansas River region.[26]

Details such as this, together with heinous details that fill Foreman's historic record, do not find their way into Merwin's poetry. Yet they are part of it, part of the words. No artist, Emerson says, can ever "wipe out of his work every trace of the thoughts amidst which it grew."[27]

Merwin's descent, in The Carrier of Ladders, into the American past is also discussed by L. Edwin Folsom.[28] In a recent article, he identifies a sequence of poems, some of which I have just discussed, and makes identifications within these poems that I too have made. His identification of this sequence, he says, was based on a conversation that he had with Merwin in 1974. In this conversation, Folsom reports, Merwin "confirmed that the sequence was conceived and written as a distinct entity while he was living in France: he was, he said, attempting to come to grips with the American past, and the word he found for that past was 'obliteration.'"[29]

This word (obliteratus, past part. of obliterare, fr. ob + litera, littera, "letter," "to erase the letter, to render undecipherable") has negative connotations. And, perhaps, it persuaded Folsom to ascribe to Merwin, and then to attempt to document in his poems, a very negative disposition. He might have assumed more positively, granting that he was familiar with all of Merwin's poetry, that if the past had obliterated all traces of the American Indian and his "letter," that Merwin might attempt to reconstruct it and, thereby, restore it to the American consciousness. Indeed, Merwin had already made such an attempt in his "Crow Versions,"[30] and he continues to do so in the poems at the center of The Carrier of Ladders.

The sequence of poems at the center of The Carrier of Ladders, by their very nature, espouse preliterate or primitive modes of awareness, not in any aesthetic or even didactic sense, but in their essence. They are not the forms of a temporal romance. Merwin has no desire to deprecate the present by sentimentalizing the past. Primitive modes of awareness are still a viable and generative aspect of the consciousness of civilized man. For these, Merwin finds many metaphors: the child, the singer, the poet, the piper, the Dahomean, and native Indian, to mention only some. And all of these afford alternate ways of seeing the world and may help man to avert what many scholars, as well as Merwin, have inferred is an "unthinkable future."

Carl Jung maintained that the Western mind was split: it had renounced esoteric knowledge in favor of science. Jung thought that this was dangerous, suicidal, and said that the most urgent question of the day was "how to alter the mind of Western man so that he would renounce his terrible skill."[31]

Merwin renounces the "terrible skill" of Western man, and does so in forms that not only praise creation but affirm the human spirit. He shows how Western man can and must change his mind. He cannot do it by going back in time. Preliterate ways of knowing are, as we have seen, though paradoxically, "a loss that has not left this place" ("The Different Stars," p.8). In order to make the necessary distinction between say the mind of primitive man and that of civilized man, or the will and the imagination, and yet not separate them, Merwin finds metaphors, images, or he creates a paradox for the reader to contemplate and resolve.

Analysis and exposition require that distinctions be made. But the affinities in Merwin's poetry with preliterate modes of awareness quite literally confirm what Lévi-Strauss, in another context, calls "the crossing of long separated paths," the thought of civilized man with that of savage man:

> that which arrives at the physical world by the detour of communication, and that which we have recently come to know, arrives at the world of communication by the detour of the physical. The entire process of human knowledge thus assumes the character of a closed system. And we therefore remain faithful to the inspiration of the savage mind when we recognize that the scientific spirit in its most modern form will, by an encounter it alone could have foreseen, have contributed to legitimize the principles of savage thought and to re-establish it in its rightful place.[32]

Merwin's poetry leads inevitably to this same conclusion, and it confirms what is evident throughout all of his work: the desire to restore that which has been broken and to find that which has been lost. "Now It Is Clear," a poem near the end of The Carrier of Ladders, expresses what I feel is the culmination of this theme and the end, in one sense, of Merwin's search for viable means of poetic articulation. Here are two stanzas from the poem:

> it is clear to me that I cannot return
> but that some of us will meet once more
> even here
> like our own statues
> and some of us still later without names
> and some of us will burn with the speed
> of endless departures
>
> and be found and lost no more (p.109).

The final line of this poem, slightly altered from the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son, confirms the figurativeness of "endless departures." The poem engenders the apparent paradox with which we are familiar in Merwin's poetry. And although there cannot be any return to the past, no way back by which we can recover the virtues of primitive thought, none is needed. The very features that contribute the most to Merwin's unique style are "those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." And this, Eliot assures us in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," is what makes a writer traditional: not his ability to duplicate but his ability to create with a "sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together."[33]

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

[1] Frances Herskovits, trans., "Dahomean Songs," Poetry, 45, No.11 (November 1934), 76. The epigraph to The Carrier of Ladders quotes exactly the last four lines. All subsequent references to poems in The Carrier of Ladders (New York: Atheneum, 1971) are given by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, The Nature of Human Society Series, ed. Julian Pitt-Rivers and Ernest Gellner (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, and London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p.276. Trans. from La Pensée sauvage (Paris: Librarie Plon, 1962).

[3] Quoted and cited in Lucy Frost, "The Poetry of W. S. Merwin: An Introductory Note," Meanjin Quarterly, 30 (September 1971), 296.

[4] The material on Dahomey that follows is based on his Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom, 2 vols. (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938), II, 321-23.

[5] Lévi-Strauss, p.263.

[6] "Two Kinds of Thinking," Symbols of Transformation, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1956), pp.11, 16,22-23. Trans. from Symbols der Wandlung; Zurich, 1952.

[7] The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion Book, 1970), p.203.

[8] Ibid., p.9.

[9] "The Analysis of Dreams," Dreams, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press,

Bollingen Paperback ed., 1974), pp.33,34.

[10] Symbols of Transformation, p.20.

[11] See, for instance, Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writing of Benjamin Lee Whorf, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, Mass.: The Technology Press of The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956), p.27.

[12] "Notes for a Preface," in The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth Century American Poetry, ed. William J. Martz (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), pp.269-70.

[13] Primitive Song (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), p.16.

[14] "Notes for CXVII et seq.," The Cantos of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1972), p.802.

[15] In The Distinctive Voice, p.28.

[16] "The Flying Serpent: Contemporary Imaginations of the American Indian," The Canadian Review of American Studies, 4, No.1 (Spring 1973), 39,37.

[17] Ibid., p.37.

[18] Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians, 2nd ed., Vol.2 in The Civilization of the American Indian Series (1953; rpt. Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1972), pp.13-15.

[19] For examples, see Foreman, pp.107, n.4,229.

[20] The Savage Mind, p.263.

[21] *North American*, in Louis Herbert Gray et al., eds., *The Mythology of All Races*, 13 vols. (Boston, 1916-32; rpt. New York: Cooper Square, 1964), X, 22.

[22] The latter in Merwin's translation of Crow Indian poetry, in Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972), pp.51-55.

[23] Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole*, 2nd ed., Vol.3 in The Civilization of the American Indian Series (1953; rpt. Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p.198.

[24] "'Tireless Quest': A Conversation with W. S. Merwin," ed. Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, *The English Record*, 19 (February 1969), p.14.

[25] In James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 vols. (Boston, New York, Cambridge, 1895) 11, 699, 701, 700.

[26] *Indian Removal*, p.284.

[27] *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Journals*, selected, and with an Introduction, by Lewis Mumford (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p.236.

[28] "Approaches and Removals: W. S. Merwin's Encounter with Whitman's America," *Shenandoah*, 29 (Spring 1978), pp. 65-66, 73.

[29] Ibid., p.57n.

[30] *Shaking the Pumpkin*, pp.51-55.

[31] "Yoga and the West," *Psychology and the East*, trans.

R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1978), p.83.

[32] The Savage Mind, p.269.

[33] Selected Essays, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p.4.

CHAPTER SIX - SONG OF MAN: THE RECENT BOOKS

> There is a continual return to places and times in
> poetry where the technique may seem less technical,
> less involved, where the possibilities seem greater.
> That's what you see in primitive poetry.
> W. S. Merwin, "Notes on a Way"

In Merwin's two most recent books of poetry, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment (1974) and The Compass Flower (1977),[1] there is no explicit indication of the continuation of his odyssey. It would be more accurate to say, as I did in Chapter Three, that Merwin's odyssey appears to end with his temporary return to America, and with the publication of The Drunk in the Furnace. Yet it still seems to me that although his odyssey is not explicitly affirmed, it is implicit throughout the nine books of his poetry.

The absence of this motif in his recent poetry is itself representative of the difference between his poems before and those after the publication of The Moving Target (1963). Generally, his poems before that book reflect an analytical and temporal consciousness, while those which follow it reflect, equally, an analogical and atemporal consciousness. The former, by delineating a quest motif, shows a concern for temporal continuity and emphasizes the figurativeness of the exploration; the latter, by excluding a quest motif, divests itself of this essentially rational bias and reflects a more liberated mode of consciousness. Naturally, this does not vitiate the quest.

The difference that occurs in Merwin's poetry is not as abrupt and as pronounced as the demarcation of books might imply. And it is certainly not as pronounced or disjunct as the terms "temporal" and "atemporal" denote. The major difference between Merwin's early and recent poetry, which these terms serve to objectify, is a difference that evolves over many years, and a difference which is itself a consequence of his odyssey.

In The Lice (1967), for instance, and particularly in "The Child," Merwin is exploring preliterate or intuitive modes of awareness. To this extent, the poems could be described as snapshots of a psychic motion in which Merwin is seen to be gradually freeing himself from the strictures of Western man's "domesticated" thought, or in which he is seen to be in the actual process of changing his own mind: "I do not believe in knowledge as we know it/ But I forget" (The Lice, p.37). The same process is evident in The Carrier of Ladders (1970).

Most of Merwin's poems, and particularly the majority of those that I have discussed, are a testament of this process, this spiritual odyssey. Every significant change in Merwin's thought is reflected in a concomitant change in the general style of his poems. If the change in his poetry was simply a matter of literary style, then one might reasonably expect a sudden change, and at any time. But such a change is not to be found.

Progressively, since The Moving Target, Merwin's poetry has become "less technical, less involved,"[2] than that which precedes it. In its brevity and apparent simplicity it is analogous to primitive poetry, not in any overt or didactic way, which would betray the poems as being merely the forms of a temporal romance, but in a way that traces the evolving consciousness of the poet.

"The creation of a work of art," Wyndham Lewis says, "is an act of the same description as the evolution of wings on the sides of a fish, the feathering of its fins; or the invention of a weapon within the body of a hymenopter to enable it to meet the terrible demands of its life."[3] The same is true of the evolution of Merwin's poetic forms; they are themselves a counter to a divisiveness that Merwin finds inherent in the thought of Western man. These evolving forms are the calends of his odyssey, continual ends and perpetual new beginnings.

Although the visible signs of Merwin's odyssey are absent in his recent poetry, his odyssey continues. There is no sense of a permanent place in either of his last two books, nothing more permanent than that which he literally finds in his travels. For instance, The Compass Flower has four parts which embrace the cardinal points. And if these parts were not composed in four different places (Mexico, America, Hawaii, and France), they are grounded in four distinctly different climates. And the poems in this volume are characterized by movement and by change. The title Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, and the poems within this book, score the same nomadic disposition as does the title of his most recent essay, "Notes on a Way."

The poems in Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment continue to explore themes similar to those in The Carrier of Ladders. They are also similar in their open forms. One conspicuous exception, "Ballade of Sayings" (p.93), employs the traditional French courtly form, but considering that this form was preserved and transmitted orally among illiterate and semiliterate people, and survives as an example of one of the archaic modes of preliterature, it does not deviate from the oral nature of Merwin's recent poetry. Traditionally, the language of the ballade is plain and formulaic, and employs a small stock of epithets and adjectives. Merwin's ballade is no exception. The word "sayings" in the title confirms its kinship with the preliterate form, and many of the lines in the poem like those of so many other lines in Merwin's recent poetry, strike chords that are as fimiliar as the aphorisms and idioms which they frequently echo. The use of the ballade form, and Merwin's sympathy for the economically oppressed, may remind readers of the poetry of François Villon, Merwin's favorite poet. But, beyond the general conventions of the form, there are no conspicuous similarities between their work.

In "Ballade of Sayings," the four stanzas of which (disregarding the envoi) trace the progression of the seasons, there are familiar echoes of John and Matthew. The line "the poor we have with us always" echoes "for the poor always ye have with you" (Jn. 12.8); and the line "at the names of the poor the eye of the needle echoes" recalls "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt. 19.24).

These echoes are easy to identify. Other lines, though tantalizingly familiar, are not; they echo cadences or, perhaps, simply the memory of cadences. Merwin offers an enlightening comment, in "Notes on a Way," when he speaks about form:

> You have the cadences which are the order, the subconscious orders of common speech, which are the source, always, of poetry. Suddenly, you recognize something in a formal or an informal poem which is really a phrase of speech that's so ordinary that you never saw it lifted out and put by itself, so it hits you in the face. So you are suddenly brought up and recognize that you've been listening to a cadence for a long time, but didn't recognize how much energy and how much clarity it had in it.[4]

Since the publication of The Drunk in the Furnace (1960) it has been Merwin's intention, he says, "to get rid of non-essentials, to do more with less." He has, and, as a consequence, the words that do remain gather all of their metaphorical potential; "the absolute poem," Merwin concludes, "would be only one word."[5]

The open forms of Merwin's new poems, the speech rhythms, the syntactically isolated words and phrases, the revealing clichés, the absence of connectives and of any punctuation, the radical juxtapositions, and the paucity of topical references, all combine to create a tensely metaphoric poetry. In "Song of Man Chipping an Arrowhead," a single image seems to echo all the words which, for more than twenty years, Merwin used to conjure the creation of a poem:

> Little children you will all go
> but the one you are hiding
> will fly (p.8).

The primitive art of knapping, the deliberate chipping of flint or obsidian, is analogous to the private creation of a poem, particularly considering the release of a force or potency which lies dormant in the mass and, naturally, because of the word "song" in the title, or, for those readers who are more familiar with Merwin's poetry, because of the word "fly" which always indicates a successful creation. With great economy the poem dramatizes the many years that Merwin had spent chipping away at "non-essentials" in his poetry.

It would be difficult to defend this interpretation. It was my first, intuitive response to the poem, long before I gave it any thought. Then, years later, Merwin himself endorsed such responses:

> The actual words for expressing it [a feeling] are always simply the same old hackneyed words which are used over and over again. So that's an obvious instance of this duality, between the institutionalized language which we didn't make up and the personal, individual, private use of it to describe the unique experience of one person's life which one trusts will be recognized and will mean something to that same area, that same inarticulable area in someone else. Consequently, readers will know in their feelings, if not at first in their minds, what you're talking about.

Merwin continues by relating his own intuitive response to Blake's "Tiger." "I've read a lot of comments on it," he says, "and I know some of the things I guess it means, but I also know that the response to it was a matter of feeling, a felt understanding long before it was an intellectual one."[6]

Examples of this sort of intuitive response must be common to many readers of Merwin's poetry. Sometimes it is the cadences that are familiar; and sometimes, more convincingly, it is word echoes. Both, for instance, resound in "Something I've Not Done":

> Something I've not done
> is following me
> I haven't done it again and again
> so it has many footsteps
> like a drumstick that's grown old and never been used
>
> In late afternoon I hear it come closer
> at times it climbs out of a sea
> onto my shoulders
> and I shrug it off
> losing one more chance
>
> Every morning
> it's drunk up part of my breath for the day
> and knows which way
> I'm going
> and already it's not done there
>
> But once more I say I'll lay hands on it
> tomorrow
> and add its footsteps to my heart
> and its story to my regrets
> and its silence to my compass (p.25).

In this poem, echoes can be heard of the general confession from the Morning Prayer, which reads in part: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us."[7]

Short phrases like these, that are balanced by parallel and antithesis, and that are usually highlighted by repetition or alliteration, were essential to the liturgical style. And, naturally, when such phrases were composed a sense of their aural impact was primary. Many such phrases, that are pleasing to the ear have long since passed from their originally oral and ecclesiastical context into the common stock of the idiom,[8] so much so that the original context might be obscured to many people, though the cadences would remain as familiar as ever.

Exactly which chords resound in "Something I've Not Done" will depend upon the reader: perhaps the initial phrase, the word "morning," or the parallel phrases and repetition in the final lines. The poem seemed to be familiar to me when I first read it, although it had been many years since I had recited, or even heard, the Morning Prayer, and I had certainly forgotten it, or thought that I had. But the cadences must have remained with me because, a few months after reading the poem, my first intuitive response found a conscious base.

Another example of this type of subconscious response occurs in "Gift," which is the final poem, and one of the most poignant prayer poems, in Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment:

> I have to trust what was given to me
> if I am to trust anything
> it led the stars over the shadowless mountain
> what does it not remember in its night and silence
> what does it not hope knowing itself no child of time
>
> what did it not begin what will it not end
> I have to hold it up in my hands as my ribs hold up
> my heart
> I have to let it open its wings and fly among the
> gifts of the unknown
> again in the mountain I have to turn
> to the morning

I must be led by what was given to me
as streams are led by it
and braiding flights of birds
the gropings of veins the learning of plants
the thankful days
breath by breath

I call to it Nameless One O Invisible
Untouchable Free
I am nameless I am divided
I am invisible I am untouchable
and empty
nomad live with me
be my eyes
my tongue and my hands
my sleep and my rising
out of chaos
come and be given (p.112).

In his essay "To Name the Wrong," Merwin characterizes poetry as a "gift." And in the Bible (Rom. 6.23) life itself is construed as a gift. But such partial identifications as the latter are not necessary to confirm the liturgical mode of this poem. Stylistic parallels can be found throughout the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and at least as far back as its antecedent the Sarum Primer of 1558. The last lines of "Gift" seem to echo a familiar prayer from this text:

God be in my head,
And in my understanding;
God be in my eyes,
And in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
And in my speaking;
God be in my heart,
And in my thinking;
God be at mine end,
And at my departing.

The intuitive response that one makes in such instances is grounded in the poem by the "feeling for syllable and rhythm" which, Eliot says, penetrates "far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end."[9] No allusion, in the strict literary sense, can effect this: it is subliminal, "as the man born blind may love color/ until all that he loves/ fills him with color," to borrow a simile from Merwin's poem "To the Rain" (p.95).

Recent poems, such as "To Be Sung While Still Looking," confirm the continuation of his odyssey and the oral quality of his style. The title of the poem, the mnemonic and formulary repetition of the opening line, "Have you seen my memory," and the word "memory" itself, confirm a kinship with the oral world. The etymology of the word "memory," as Eric Havelock shows in his study of the oral tradition of the early Greeks, reveals not only the Greek word from which "memory" and "music" derive but also the term "muses," together with a sense of their ancient role: "They are not the daughters of inspiration or invention, but basically of memorisation [sic] . Their central role is not to create but to preserve."[10]

It is a moot point whether it is the artist or the Muse who preserves, and one which at the conclusion of "To Be Sung While Still Looking" remains suspended in metaphor:

> Have you seen my memory
> in better light
> no sound for the moment
> as there might
> with those faces
> and the gates about to close
> that never do
>
> Have you seen my memory
> that hardly knew
> what to do with the flags

at an age where nothing dies
but the windows are open
and same eyes
as it rolls with no echo
on the thankless roads

Have you seen my memory
after years
by fallen schools
with the smell of coats on it
and smaller coats
when there is time enough
have you seen promises
or the tracks have you noticed
the age of the air
once it's clear

Have you seen my memory
minus the fancy words
have you looked in the cases
where I kept my mind
to tell me things
such as she lay in shallow water
in shallow water she lies
and she comes out to me
the first day
not far from home

Have you seen
my memory
the flame far from the candles (pp.16-17).

Merwin's muse leads him through an atemporal world in which he continues to deny allegiance to any "schools," and in which he still regards "flags" merely as emblems of man's divisiveness. He shuns "fancy words" and manifestations of the intellect: "cases [c.f. L cadere, "to fall"] where I kept my mind." For the mind, as is evident in the poem, is capable of relating some strange "things": "such as she lay in shallow water/ in shallow water she lies." "Shallow" comes from the Greek word skeletos, "dried up." And the point is that such phrases are vague and, within the poem, serve as examples of an institutionalized language, of the "case" forms surviving from the latinate grammar, and as examples of two verbs (lay and lie) the correct use of which still requires explanation in many grammar books.

Grammar, originally, as Ong has shown, "is very closely connected with writing (the term comes from the Greek techné grammatikē, 'the art of letters of the alphabet')."[11] And he has shown elsewhere that Latin "fell under total chirographic control," and then came to be known as a "dead" language when, in fact, it is "not a dead language but a chirographically controlled language." Latin, he adds, underwent a "sound-sight split" which is a "major phenomenon of linguistic and cultural history, although it is hardly mentioned as such by the historians."[12]

Merwin is obviously aware of this phenomenon. Such manifestations of the intellect, facets of man's divisiveness, when they do appear in Merwin's recent poetry, do so as negative emblems which evoke no viable connection with the world. They always seem out of place in the poems, and they are; they are intended to be.

The last stanza of "To Be Sung While Still Looking," "Have you seen/ my memory/ the flame far from the candles," poses a different question from that of the first line of the preceding stanzas, which all begin, "have you seen my memory." The final question, "have you seen," is more pertinent. It involves the reader, as does a riddle; and it exemplifies the kinship of the riddle to the metaphor, and reveals another facet of the metaphoric ambience of Merwin's style.

Memory is a "flame far from the candles." And whether "candles" is equated with Muses or with words, which Emerson regards as being "a sort of tomb of the muses,"[13] it makes little difference. A paradox exists that must remain in metaphor. Such paradoxes are essential, Merwin says in a talk that was later transcribed, a "tension between opposites":

> If you stop to think about it, all words; [sic] all language are the past. Poetry is about the present. I believe even when it thinks it's about the past, it is really about the real moment in which you read it. Otherwise it doesn't mean anything to you. But the thing that you are using to write it, the thing that you are using to read it, the thing that you are using to understand it, communicate with, is the past. You got it from somewhere else. I mean it was already old when you got it. You didn't make up the words that you are writing down, you know. They are not your words, they are not the present words. Yet in a sense beyond prose and ordinary conversation, poetry is trying to convey a present, it is trying to convey something which remains, which is underneath the flux of things. And it uses the flux of things, it uses words, which are the past, to do it. So, that is an essential paradox in its nature, a tension between opposites.[14]

The theme of what Ong terms a "sound-sight split" is evident throughout Merwin's poetry. For clarity, this theme deserves a generic term. But there are separate manifestations of it which I have variously described as evident in Merwin's concern for the integrity of man's senses, and in his explorations of a divisiveness that is inherent in Western man's cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions. Similar themes continue to be explored in Merwin's most recent poetry.

The first poem in Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, "Early One Summer," cautions:

Years from now
someone will come upon a layer of birds
and not know what he is listening for

these are days
when the beetles hurry through dry grass
hiding pieces of light they have stolen (p.3).

"Birds," as I have shown, should be understood to include poems, and a "layer of birds" to include poems as they would appear folded in a book. An implied loss of auditory discrimination, though "years from now," would herald the end of poetry. But the poem prefigures a current aridity and a world in which insect life, feeding on decay, flourishes. It is a commonplace that insect life will, in the event of a cataclysm, survive man. This is implicit in the image of the beetle which suggests the ancient Egyptian symbol of eternality, the scarab, or dung beetle, whose eggs (microcosms) are rolled and incubated in dung.

"Early One Summer" is one of several poems at the beginning of this volume, each with a similar enthymematic-type structure, the excluded middle of which signifies something that cannot be uttered or expressed logically; it cannot because it represents an intuitive or a felt response rather than a conscious argument. To this extent these poems are analogical, and are more representative of an oral world than a chirographic one. In other words, there are no connectives or sequential markers to relate the stanzas.

Habits of visual synthesis, which Ong theorizes were fostered by literacy, continue to be challenged by Merwin's poetry. In "A Door," this theme is explicit:

What is dying all over the world
is a door

you will say That
is a dead thing

and you will be talking about the entry
to a chamber of your heart

you will say of that door
It is a thing

and you will be speaking of your heart

the streets will run over the wells
the wires will cover the sky
the lines will cross out the eyes
singing numbers numbers
numbers
numbers of
shadows of generations of armies with flags
the streets will run over the ears
trucks will run over the streets
no crying will be heard
nor any calling
the function of laughing neither remembered
so a tick coming over us
for no cause we by then
recognize
meanwhile in each cell the noise
turning higher as it approaches
and still someone touching
a silence
an opening
may hear all around us the endless home (pp.34-35).

A related theme is explored in "A Purgatory." Based on tradition and not on the Scriptures, Purgatory is the place in which purifying punishment is given to venial sinners before they can enter Heaven. There is general agreement on the presence of fire as the purifying agent but, contrary to sermons about hellfire and brimstone, not necessarily fire in any literal sense:

Once more the hills
are made of remembered darkness torn off
and the eye rises from its grave

upon its old
upon its ancient life

but at a wrong moment

once more the eye
reveals the empty river
feathers on all the paths
the despairing fields
the house in which every word
faces a wall

and once more it climbs
trying to cast again
the light in which that landscape
was a prospect of heaven

everywhere
the vision has just passed out of sight
like the shadows sinking
into the waking stones
each shadow with a dream in its arms
each shadow with the same
dream in its arms

and the eye must burn again and again
through each of its lost moments
until it sees (p.46).

The desecrated landscape and the silencing of song, "the house in which every word/ faces a wall," are detailed as a consequence of the eye's veniality. In "A Door," a future is envisioned in which the senses themselves will have been mutilated. But, in "A Purgatory," the possibility of a redemption is held, and man's present condition viewed as a figurative purgatory: "the eye must burn again and again/ through each of its lost moments," be purified and returned to a state of innocence, "until it sees."

Similar themes of man's divisiveness are explored throughout Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, but particularly in such poems as "Distances" (p.6), "Their Week" (p.22), "Old Flag" (p.23), "Division" (p.44), and "Exercise" (p.69). All of these poems are less satiric than those which dealt with related themes in Merwin's previous volumes. The significance of these new poems, their meaning in a real sense, is indissociable from their form. Progressively in Merwin's poetry the evidence of man's divisiveness is presented in the most positive way, in contrast to the wholeness and harmony of the natural world, which continues to provide Merwin with images of "direct and integrated sensual criteria."[15]

In this respect, his most recent book, The Compass Flower, contains the most harmonious and lucid poems that he has yet composed. "Kore," a tribute to his art and an homage to his muse, in twenty-four stanzas, provides the best example. These are the first stanzas:

> α I have watched your smile in your sleep
> and I know it is the boat
> in which my sun rides under the earth
> all night on the wave of your breath
> no wonder the days grow short
> and waking without you
> is the beginning of winter
>
> β How is it that I can hear your bird voice now
> trickling among the ice towers
> through the days of the anvil
> as the year turns I carry an echo
> over my own stones and I listen
> my eyes are open looking ahead
> I walk a little ahead of myself touching
> the light air where nobody sees you
> and the sun as it sets through the forest of windows
> unrolls slowly its
> unrepeatable secret
> all the colors of autumn without the leaves
>
> γ You were shaking and an air full of leaves
> flowed out of the dark falls of your hair

> down over the rapids of your knees
> until I touched you and you grew quiet
> and raised to me
> your hands and your eyes and showed me
> twice my face burning in amber
>
> Already on the first hill with you beside me
> at the foot of the ruins I saw through the day
> and went on without pausing
> loving the unheld air
> as a wing might love it flying
> toward you unknowing
> knowing (pp.49-50).

"Kore" (Gr. Korē) means "the maiden." And, although Merwin unites several mythologies within the poem, in Greek mythology she is equated with Persephone. But in Attica, especially in connection with the Eleusinsian mysteries and in Orphic literature, she is called Kore and appears an as all-pervading nature Goddess.[16]

In the poem, Kore represents all the years, more specifically, all the changing seasons of Merwin's vocation. His offerings to her, "bracelets of plaited straw," are formed from the natural gifts of her own increase and represent the simple, unornamented craft of his poetry. And to her Merwin credits the wisdom of his art: "You found me the old tools/ that I had been looking for/ you knew where they were/ in my garden" (p.54).

The sense of movement, which, as I noted earlier, characterizes this book and the continuation of Merwin's odyssey, is evident in the last stanza of "Kore":

> The shadow of my moving foot
> feels your direction
> you come toward me
> bringing the gold through the rust
> you step to me through the city of amber

> under the moon and the sun
> voice not yet in the words
> what is spoken is already
> another year (p.56).

The same sense of movement is apparent in his poem "Guardians," in which he says of his tutelary spirits: "Fear is one aspect of joyful guardians/ because of the way I came/ and clearly I have been in love with some of them/ with her who is Fear of the Journey/ who has repeatedly and faithfully led me" (p.17). But it is the overall structure of The Compass Flower which, as much as anything else, confirms the continuation of Merwin's odyssey.

Readers of Jung will be struck by the mandala-like image in the title. It is a world-wide symbol of wholeness, a charmed or magic circle, and a potent means of symbolic expression.[17] But the compass flower is literally one of several plants the leaves or branches of which are disposed to arrange themselves on the axis so as to indicate the cardinal points of the compass. Certainly, the four parts of Merwin's book each contain poems that do so, particularly the first poem in the book which speaks, figuratively, of the four chambers of the heart, and most of these poems also imply perpetual movement and change.

Part One of The Compass Flower contains nineteen poems which trace a progression like the seasons they frequently depict. For instance, in "The Wine," Merwin celebrates his part in the life-cycle: "with what joy I am carrying/ a case of wine up a mountain/ far behind me others/ are being given their burdens/ but I could not wait even for them" (p.5). Then, in two of the three poems that commemorate the death of his parents, both "gone as though at once" (p.32), the same sense of continuity which negates time ("sundial and steps and calendar") is central:

> You with no fear of dying
> how you dreaded winter
> the cataract forming on the green wheated hill
> ice on sundial and steps and calendar
> it is snowing
> after you were unborn it was my turn
> to carry you in a world before me
> trying to imagine you
> I am your parent at the beginning of winter
> you are my child
> we are one body
> one blood
> one red line melting the snow
> unbroken line in falling snow (p.8).

Similarly, in the last stanza of one of the companion poems to this one, Merwin again addresses the spirit of his parent:

> now will you lead with your small hand
> your child up the leafless mountain
> past the green wooden doors thrown away
> and abandoned shelters
> into the meadows of loose horses
> that I will ride in the dark to come (p.9).

In another poem, "A Contemporary," Merwin imagines what it would be like to lead a protean, plant-like existence:

> What if I came down now out of these
> solid dark clouds that build up against the mountain
> day after day with no rain in them
> and lived as one blade of grass
> in a garden in the south when the clouds part in winter
> from the beginning I would be older than all the animals
> and to the last I would be simpler
> frost would design me and dew would disappear on me
> sun would shine through me
> I would be green with white roots
> feel worms touch my feet as a bounty

have no name and no fear
turn naturally to the light
know how to spend the day and night
climbing out of myself
all my life (p.15).

Almost all of the poems in Part One have rural settings. This contrasts the setting of the "city" poems in Part Two, in which there are no seasons and in which only one month, January, is mentioned. In the first poem, "City," the same sense of movement, that I have alluded to, connotes the transitory nature of Merwin's visit to the city: "I have steered in through the tightening outskirts/ in the morning crowd/ I have undergone inspections been counted have believed/ I have learned the streets like seasons/ I have forgotten whole years" (p.25).

This poem anticipates the poems that follow in Part Two. They portray familiar aspects of a denatured, metropolitan existence in which people "know one another/ riding deaf together/ flying up in boxes/ through gray gasses . . . , where sirens bleed through us/ wires reach to us" and in which people have become effigies of their own narcosis: "we are bottles smashing in brown paper bags" (p.28). The consequences of a life spent in a large city are frightening. In a poem that continues to show Merwin's concern for the future of man, "The Counting Houses," he ponders time spent in a city, a place bereft of nature and dedicated to commerce:

Where do the hours of a city begin and end
among so many
the limits rising
and setting each time in each body
in a city how many hands of timepieces

must be counting the hours
clicking at a given moment
numbering insects into machines to be codified
calculating newsprint in the days of the living
all together they are not infinite
any more than the ignored patience
of rubber tires day and night
or the dumbness of wheels or the wires of passions

where is the horizon the avenue has not reached it
reaching and reaching lying palm upward
exposing the places where blood is given or let
at night the veins of the sleepers remember trees
countless sleepers the hours of trees
the uncounted hours the leaves in the dark
by day the light of the streets is the color of arms
kept covered
and of much purpose
again at night the lights of the streets play on
ceilings
they brush across walls
of room after unlit room hung with pictures
of the youth of the world (p.29).

Other aspects of city life are shown to be equally dehumanizing, like those in "St Vincent's" in which "sirens" howl "through traffic" (p.34), the throb of machines is "heard by the whole body," and "meals from a meal factory" (p.35) define the only sustenance. These are not only aspects of a city in which Merwin once lived and to which he has returned to visit, but they are also portents of the future. They delineate a direction, a sort of line which is seen in one of its most frighteningly familiar and human forms in a supermarket food chain. The poem is called "Line":

Those waiting in line
for a cash register at a supermarket
pushing wire baby carriages
full of food in packages
past signs about coupons
in the blank light
do not look at each other
frankly
pretend not to stare at each other's

soft drinks and white bread
do not think of themselves as
part of a line
ordinarily
and the clerk often does not
look at them
giving them change
and the man who puts the things
they have chosen
into bags
talks to the clerk
as he never talks to her
at any other time (p.26).

The images in the poem, and the root word "frank," "free," suggest the bondage of the consumer.

Part Three of The Compass Flower contains the most poems. "Kore" is one of them. Like "Kore," the poems in this section are teeming with life. The variety of the natural landscape is welcome, as one emerges from a section of city poems to be greeted by "The Vineyard" (p.41) and "a tangle of wild plum and hazel bushes . . . bats and small birds/ foxes and wild honey." One poem, "September Plowing," conveys the apotheosis of nature's splendor in this section:

For seasons the walled meadow
south of the house built of its stone
grows up in shepherd's purse and thistles
the weeds share April as a secret
finches disguised as summer earth
click the drying seeds
mice run over rags of parchment in August
the hare keeps looking up remembering
a hidden joy fills the songs of the cicadas

two days' rain wakes the green in the pastures
crows agree and hawks shriek with naked voices
on all sides the dark oak woods leap up and shine
the long stony meadow is plowed at last and lies
all day bare
I consider life after life as treasures
oh it is the autumn light

> that brings everything back in one hand
> the light again of beginnings
> the amber appearing as amber (p.44).

A majority of the poems in Part Three are love songs which, like "Kore," are not limited by an expression of personal love. This does not mean that there is no living inspiration for these poems, a person to whom they are addressed. I believe that there is, but she is a part of the living world that the poems celebrate. She is the embodiment of tropical landscapes, shores and seas, the passage of day and night, the symbolic communion of water, and such emblems of cyclical return as "a constellation of flowers breathing on the sea" (p.64). Departing visitors to Hawaii traditionally cast the gift of a wreath of flowers onto the sea. If the flowers drift shoreward, they are said to indicate the visitor will surely return to the islands.

The last part of The Compass Flower evokes a European setting, not of any one specific place but one where there is, for instance, a "castle" with a "gate house" that "has been turned/ into a gas station" (p.79). Other details indicate a similar European locale, possible France where for many years Merwin had lived. And these poems, like those in the other parts of the book, are more characteristic of Merwin's continued odyssey than of a permanent place or of a home. "We will be leaving now in less than a week," "Ferry Port" (pp.76-77) begins, and the majority of the remaining poems show Merwin to be constantly moving. Phantom images, like that of Charon in "Remembering a Boatman," remind Merwin of his mortality and perhaps of what he has yet to accomplish:

> After sundown yellow sky beyond shadow mountains
> range upon range in long twilight under few distant clouds
> darkening pastures run into the bays
> birds are already asleep high on unlit roan cliffs
> straw light still flickers on the water
> between two headlands in short summer
> at last a long boat rowed by one man standing
> appears slowly from behind a headland on the right
> and starts across
> too far away to hear the sounds of the wood
> or see colors
> a few times the wake turns up light
> then I forget him for years (p.84).

The last poem in this volume is called "The Flight" and it, too, confirms the continuation of Merwin's odyssey. But readers of his poetry would find it difficult to believe that he could do anything other than to "fare forward," to borrow Eliot's phrase again. More than once, Merwin has characterized himself as a prodigal son, and not without literal significance. More than twenty-five years ago, he embarked on an odyssey that led him throughout Europe and to poetry in the most intricate of closed forms which, in turn, led him to a progressively simple, oral, and essentially primitive style, which is itself a harbinger of the future and an emblem of the past. Merwin remembers that as a boy his first attempts at poetry were "hymns" written for his father, who was a Presbyterian minister. But he also remembers "wondering if there might not be some liberating mode."[18] Perhaps, in that moment Merwin's odyssey began.

Any study of a poet whose work is not complete will be partial at best, particularly a study of a difficult and a prolific poet such as W. S. Merwin. Continual changes in the style of his books over the years have made it difficult to categorize his poetry, and even more difficult to predict what his next collection of poems might be like.

There has been no extensive study of his poetry, and shorter studies that deal with only portions of it often seem inaccurate in the light of subsequent developments in his poetry. To complicate matters, Merwin seems unwilling to have his poetry categorized, even it seems in the most general terms. He was once asked, for instance, if he would agree that he represented "a kind of 'middle ground' in contemporary poetry--neither 'Academic' nor 'New American.'" He replied: "I suppose so. I don't know what either 'school' is supposed to consist of, but I don't think that I've ever been part of either." Then, characteristically independent, he added: "I don't quite see how that necessarily lands me in the 'middle' of anything though."[19]

Merwin's other, relatively rare, statements about his poetry are usually characterized by a metaphoric ambience that does not facilitate definitive conclusions, but which seems to lead back to his poetry--a poetry in which such conclusions are equally difficult to formulate because it reasserts what he insists poetry is: an "undomesticated" phenomenon, a "spirit," and a "gift." "No one has any claims" on poetry, he says, "no one deserves it, no one knows where it goes. It is not pain and it is not the subconscious, though it can hail from either as though it were at home there."[20]

Such an esoteric view of poetry might lead one to suspect that Merwin is being evasive, were it not for the fact that much of his work over the last twenty-eight years or so represents an attempt to understand the phenomena of modern poetry. As this study has shown, his first four books, that were written during a lengthy stay in Europe, involve an exploration of the Western literary tradition, and an assessment of its influence upon the development of modern poetry. Although an obvious quest motif unites these books, and delineates this central theme, critics generally tend to overlook the evidence of the exploration and, therefore, its significance within the canon of Merwin's poetry. Instead, they view the books as evidence of his craftsmanship, but also of his unquestioning conformity to the Western poetic tradition. One or two critics even suggest that Merwin's early work shows a young poet who is engaged in the process of learning and exercising a traditional craft. However, it is more reasonable to assert that Merwin had already learned his craft. In his early work, he uses certain traditional forms and meters as a vehicle for satire, because he believes that their continued use is either habitual, decorative, or both. But this has been overlooked by his critics.

Toward the end of Merwin's early work, notably in Green With Beasts, it is clear that he begins to suspect that the formative influence of the European literary tradition might lead to a "domestication" of his own poetry, and he starts to question the integrity and originality of his work. As a consequence, he decides not to remain in Europe but to return to America and, in an important sense, to the modern world in which he would formulate a new poetics.

He knew that his subsequent poetry would be unlike anything that he had written before. And he must also have known that he risked losing the reputation, the security, and the critical acclaim that his early work had earned him; but he accepted that risk. Merwin's fifth book, The Moving Target, exemplifies his new poetics. It aschews a linear, literary style, and an erudite verse, that is generally characteristic of his early work, and extolls an essentially oral and a progressively simple mode of poetry.

Initially, this book was either ignored, greeted with derision, or described as surrealistic--a term which is not defined in Merwin criticism, but which obtained a certain vogue for a while. Undefined, the term could include poetry that is barely indistinguishable from prose, or that which reveals the contents of dreams and hallucinations, or even that which represents automatic writing as dictated by the unconscious. Merwin has something in common with the surrealists. He is chary of the conscious mind, of poetic conventions, and of the censorship of habit; but this does not make him a surrealist. In common with the surrealists, he is interested in the world as it is revealed by the senses and, so disposed, his poetry often challenges the primacy of the reasoning mind. Other than this, Merwin's poetry has little else in common with surrealistic verse.

As this study has shown, Merwin's recent poetry reaffirms an oral, or a preliterate mode of poetry, which is informed as much by the mythopoeic, or prelogical, consciousness as by the reasoning mind. The evidence of this is abundant throughout Merwin's recent poetry, his essays and, to some degree, even in the poetry that he has chosen to translate. Themes of modern man's divisiveness, which occupy much of Merwin's recent work, generally contrast the function of the reasoning mind to that of the mythopoeic, consciousness. The former, Merwin's poetry attests, tends to be divisive in its operations while the latter exhibits quite the opposite tendency--not that Merwin rejects the one in favor of the other, but that he insists on the equal integrity of both modes of consciousness. That the reasoning faculty of the human mind is somehow allied to literacy is theoretical, but the equation exists in Merwin's recent poetry where it seems to corroborate the speculation of other scholars. It is an interesting facet of Merwin's poetry, and one that certainly deserves further examination.

The considerable amount of Merwin's poetry dictated the scope of this study, and precluded a more detailed examination and appraisal of his poetic achievement. But, based upon discoveries that I have made in conducting the study, his poetry seems to be marked as much by its contiguity, as by what first appeared to be its diversity. It is a poetry that can withstand closer examination, and which promises to reward further study.

It is likely that another collection of Merwin's poems will soon be published. And it is also likely that the collection will not be dissimilar from that which preceded. The poems will probably continue to represent a style that is essentially oral. They will extoll the integrity of the mythopoeic consciousness as much as that of the reasoning mind; and they will continue to celebrate the beauty of the natural world, and to alert man to the suicidal nature of ecological destruction.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

[1] All subsequent references to Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment (New York: Atheneum, 1973), and The Compass Flower (New York: Atheneum, 1977) are given by page number(s) in parenthesis after quotations.

[2] Merwin, "Notes on a Way," in Rick Fields, ed., Loka 2: A Journal from Naropa Institute (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1976), p.142.

[3] "The Caliph's Design," in Wyndham Lewis on Art, Introduction and Notes by Walter Michel and C. J. Fox (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), p.152.

[4] "Notes on a Way," p.143.

[5] Quoted in Frank MacShane, "A Portrait of W. S. Merwin," Shenandoah, 21, No.2 (Winter 1970), p.13.

[6] "Notes on a Way," p.145.

[7] The Book of Common Prayer . . . (Oxford and London: Oxford Univ. Press, n.d.), p.43.

[8] See Stella Brook, The Language of the Book of Common Prayer (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp.68-69,199, et passim.

[9] "Matthew Arnold" (1933), in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp.118-19.

[10] Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1963), p.100.

[11] Walter J. Ong, S.J., Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p.16.

[12] The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967; rpt. New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion Book, 1970), pp.78-79.

[13] "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Journals, selected, with an Introduction, by Lewis Mumford (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p.256.

[14] "Notes on a Way," p.142; Merwin's emphasis.

[15] "Notes for a Preface," in William J. Martz, ed. The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century American Poetry (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p.272.

[16] For a fuller exposition of Demeter and Kore, see Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, 2 vols. (New York: George Braziller, 1957), I, 89-96.

[17] For Jung's exposition of mandala symbolism, see, for example, "Commentary on The Secret of The Golden Flower," in Psychology and The East, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Paperback ed., 1978), pp.24-30 et passim.

[18] Quoted in "W. S. Merwin," in C. D. Kinsman, ed. Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1962), p.299.

[19] Quoted in David Ossman, "W. S. Merwin," The Sullen Art: Interview by David Ossman with Modern American Poets (New York: Corinth Books, 1963), p.67.

[20] "Notes for a Preface," p.270.

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